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# Skills for Success

Supporting and Assessing Key Habits,  
Mindsets, and Skills in PreK-12

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**A**cademic tenacity. Perseverance toward long-term goals. Emotional intelligence. These kinds of habits, mindsets, and non-technical skills are integral to academic, professional, and personal success. Recently, they have begun to enter public discourse as research demonstrating their importance has been made more accessible through the use of terms such as “growth mindsets,” “grit,” and “character.” The various terms used to describe such skills, habits, and mindsets are so numerous that, for this paper, we use a simple phrase that describes the outcomes associated with them: “skills for success.”

While high-quality pre-K programs strive to impart many skills for success (SFS) in addition to specific academic content, the same has not been true for most K–12 schools, particularly in later grades. Some argue that this difference is appropriate, as SFS can only be instilled early in life. However, research demonstrates that these skills are malleable, and many can be easily developed through young adulthood. Others argue that K–12 schools cannot, or should not, influence the attainment of these skills. But as some schools begin to experiment with different approaches to imparting these skills, the evidence indicates otherwise. Some of these approaches attempt to directly “teach” SFS, while others focus on ensuring that the climate—the school and classroom environment, policies, and practices—promotes positive teaching and learning conditions that can bolster SFS. Finally, some say schools must confine themselves to academic content due to accountability systems that focus only on outcomes on subject tests. But research shows that many of these skills, such as self-regulation and cooperation, are, in fact, closely linked to academic achievement.

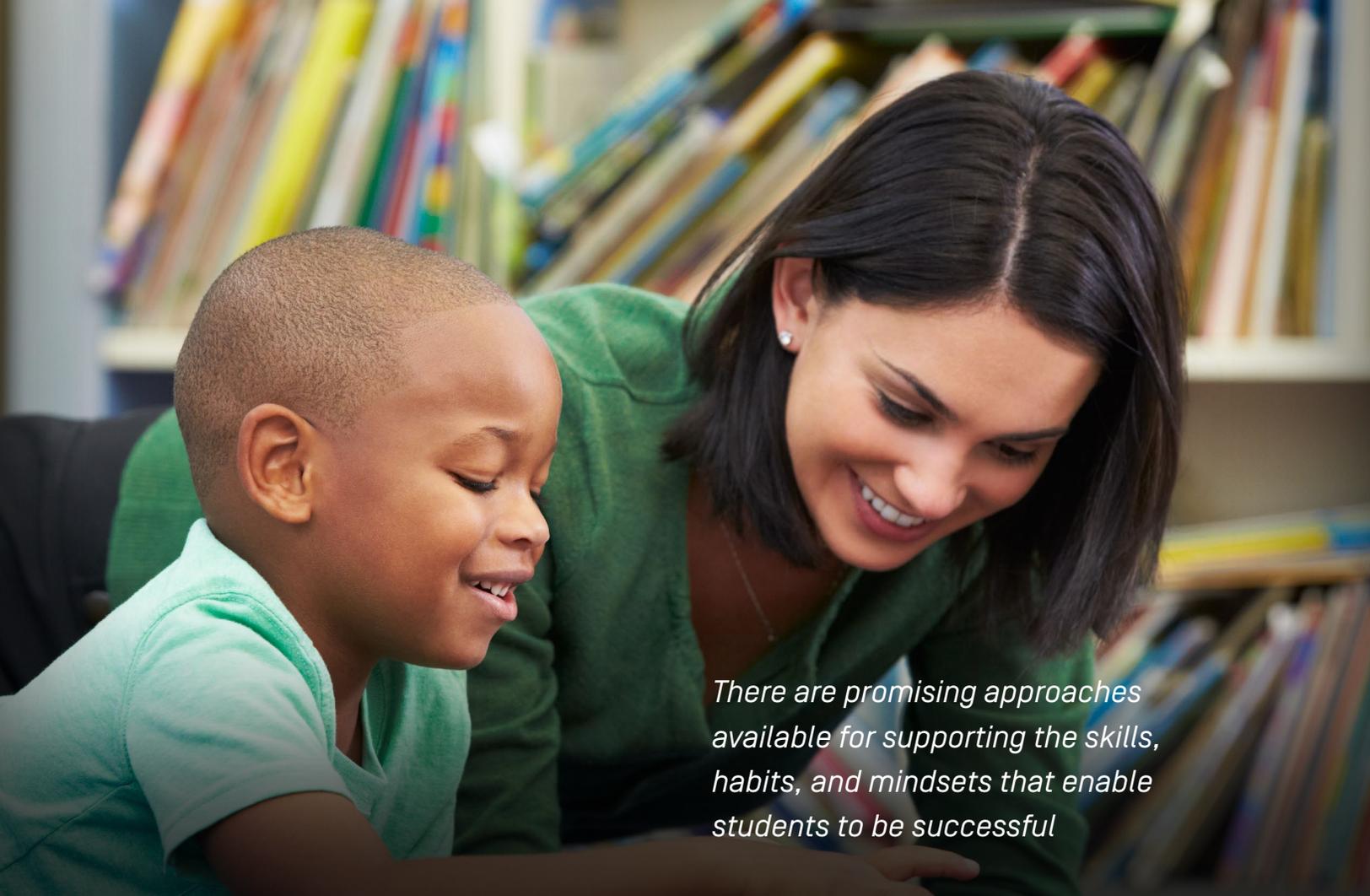
There are some promising approaches available, both from pre-K and K–12, for supporting the skills, habits, and mindsets that enable students to be successful academically as well as professionally and personally

throughout their lives. At the same time, there are still outstanding questions as to: 1) what the most effective and efficient approaches are; 2) how to ensure that educators and parents understand the value of such approaches; and 3) how to best prepare and train educators to maintain their strong focus on developing academic knowledge, while cultivating SFS as well. One thing is clear: school and classroom climate can either help promote or deter the development of SFS. Thus, failing to address a negative or unsupportive educational climate could prevent potential long-term benefits of other SFS efforts from being realized.

## *Certain habits, mindsets, and non-technical skills are integral to academic, professional, and personal success*

To be effective, any SFS approach must be clearly aligned with local needs and goals and be implemented with fidelity. A system of assessments can help achieve these goals. Needs assessments can help inform decisions about strategies to reach SFS goals, while implementation assessments can provide feedback on the quality of strategy implementation and the level of progress associated with those strategies. Well-run schools are already using these types of assessments in other areas to ensure that they are helping move all students toward their full potential.

Increasingly, tools for assessing student-level outcomes are being developed and employed to provide insight on whether SFS goals are being met. Evaluating some types of SFS in individual students is difficult, and may not be possible to do consistently and accurately without significant time and expense. Further, it may



*There are promising approaches available for supporting the skills, habits, and mindsets that enable students to be successful*

not currently be possible to assess certain skills well at all. But as more research is done, both by academics and practitioners, measures of SFS continue to improve. These assessments, along with higher-quality tests of content knowledge and cognitive skills, such as the new Common Core State Standards assessments, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' skills and areas for growth.

*Assessments of skills for success can provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' skills and areas for growth*

Just because K–12 policymakers and practitioners can measure individual students' SFS does not mean they

necessarily should, at least not in a consequential way for students, such as deciding whether to promote them to the next grade. Instead, they can learn from early education programs that use 1) student-level SFS assessments to help teachers identify and address students' individual needs; 2) teacher observations to inform and improve SFS practices; 3) and ratings of school and classroom climate to create conditions that promote SFS.

Since schools and teachers can positively or negatively influence the development of students' SFS, teacher observations and school environment ratings should—over time—be incorporated into educator and school accountability systems, Pre-K–12th grade.

Local educational agencies (LEAs), states, and the federal government can help or hinder schools' efforts to impart and assess SFS. In early education, certain SFS are woven into standards, assessments, and

accountability systems, reflecting research that holds up the importance of a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning. Having a state and/or federal focus on cultivating SFS in the same way for K–12 schools could help promote a clearer focus in this area.

However, just putting policies in place will not be sufficient to strengthen these skills in our students. For instance, which education actor(s) “own” the implementation of the policy matters for gaining attention and obtaining support from key stakeholders. Ultimately, whether these efforts are successful will depend on the work of educators, and the communities in which they teach. An important aspect of developing educator and community enthusiasm for SFS is to communicate their value. States, LEAs, and schools can do this by providing evidence for how these skills can help students succeed in school and in life, and explaining how they are a critical, integral piece of the move toward college- and career-ready standards. Above all, educators must be provided with the training necessary to do the work. Policymakers and practitioners must be thoughtful about ensuring sufficient time for high-quality educator training and assessments for formative purposes *before* moving to report assessment data for public consumption and/or “high stakes” accountability purposes.

Based on a review of the research and strategies discussed within this paper, New America makes several recommendations for how various entities—federal and state governments, LEAs and schools, and research institutions—can encourage progress on developing certain SFS in schools, PreK–12.

## Four Key Recommendations for Federal and State Policymakers

Federal and state policymakers should set the stage for a greater school focus on bolstering certain skills for success by:

- 1. Providing funding and resources for LEAs and schools to experiment with different implementation models and assessments,** potentially through competitive funding programs.
- 2. Promoting a more holistic approach to school assessment and accountability** that ensures school and district leaders are held responsible for establishing a positive school climate and culture, a precondition for developing engaged and successful students. One way this could be done is by including school climate measures as part of public reporting and transparency.
- 3. Encouraging shifts in educator practice** by incorporating a focus on supporting students’ skills for success into educator evaluation systems that inform development and personnel decisions.
- 4. Promoting a more holistic, comprehensive system of student assessments** to provide formative information for teachers, parents, and students.

## Additional Recommendations

To ensure the above policy recommendations have the desired effect, the following stakeholders should engage in these additional actions:

### Federal Policymakers

- **Funding more research to help determine the most effective approaches and assessment methods** and disseminate that information widely, including to states, LEAs, and schools.

### State Policymakers

- **Recognizing that passing legislation and establishing regulations to create skills for success standards can help ensure schools prioritize these skills, but are not sufficient on their own.** Because of this, policymakers must also ensure that:
  - > **Standard-setting and coordination at the state level are paired with implementation support at the local level.**
  - > When developing a comprehensive set of SFS standards, LEAs should be allowed flexibility to **stagger the implementation of those**

**standards** based on a local needs assessment that identifies SFS priority areas.

- > At the state level, **SFS standards are part of a department closely tied to academic instruction and school performance.** Not doing so almost guarantees standards will not be incorporated into school and classroom practices.
- > At the local level, **school leaders and teachers understand why the standards have been created or why they are being asked to focus on school climate.** In order to garner backing at the local level, states will need to provide ample communication, effective training, reasonable expectations, and sufficient room for customization. Key assessment measures should be comparable across schools.
- **Requiring educator preparation programs, as a part of program approval, to train prospective educators in methods for establishing positive classroom and school environments** which can bolster students' SFS.
- **Providing LEAs and schools with digestible research on the importance of promoting student SFS on student outcomes**—including academic outcomes—to build support for a larger school focus on these skills.

#### *LEA-Level Policymakers*

- **Clearly communicating with school leaders and teachers** to help ensure all educators are on board with intentionally supporting the development of students' SFS.
- **Providing ample training for school leaders and teachers on how to develop students' SFS,** and use feedback from assessments to drive professional learning opportunities.
- **Sharing research with educators, parents, students, and the community-at-large on the impact of promoting SFS on student outcomes,**

including academic outcomes.

#### *School-Level Educators*

- **Raising awareness of the importance of SFS** with school and LEA leadership and peers.
- **Beginning to embed practices throughout the day** that help build student SFS, potentially along with explicit skills instruction.
- **Looking to students for insights,** when developmentally appropriate, into how to improve classroom and school environments.

#### *Education and Psychometric Researchers*

- **Continuing to analyze new and current implementation methods and programs** in order to provide feedback to practitioners and policymakers about which may help them best impart SFS.
- **Continuing to research current assessment methods** to assess validity and reliability, and **developing additional assessments** that can meet these criteria.

#### **Final Thoughts**

The responsibility for developing SFS does not lie with students and parents alone, and pre-K programs are proof that this need not be a bifurcated conversation about whether schools should focus on imparting content knowledge OR skills for success. While more needs to be learned about how to best support students' development of some of these skills from pre-K through secondary school, schools can and should experiment with evidence-based approaches to directly and indirectly do so. But only through a focus on assessment will schools know which skills to work on, which approach(es) to use, and how well they are implementing the approach(es). And only by ensuring that school and educator accountability systems ultimately incorporate information from these assessments will developing SFS be seen as a priority for elementary, middle, and high schools, as it is for high-quality pre-K programs.

# INTRODUCTION

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**A** first grade teacher sits in a circle with her students, reading a story. One boy waves his hand in the air, trying to get her attention. Able to wait no longer, he bursts out, “How long until recess?”

A fifth grade teacher assigns a student-chosen research project that will culminate in a written report. One student asks for help selecting a topic the day before the project is due.

A tenth grade teacher asks students to work in small groups to solve a challenging math problem and explain their rationale to the class. In one group, a girl sits off to the side, working toward an answer, but not engaging in her team’s discussion.

Self-regulation. Planning and goal-setting. Collaboration and communication. These skills—and others like them, such as persistence, flexibility, and initiative—are critical to academic and social success in school and later in life. However, many students do not fully develop and learn how to use these “skills for success” (SFS).

While parents and communities play an important role in helping children and adolescents develop these skills, so can formal educational experiences. High-quality pre-kindergarten programs for three- and four-year-olds, for example, focus on building early academic skills as well as developing the ability to make friends, show curiosity, pay attention, solve problems, and stick with a task even when it is complicated.

This holistic approach to teaching and learning should not cease when students enter elementary school and later grades. While an extensive body of research shows that the brain develops more rapidly during the early years than at any other time, research also shows that SFS continue to be malleable throughout young

adulthood. Yet, unlike pre-kindergarten programs, most K–12 public schools have not embraced a strong role, or in some cases any role, in trying to impart or support these skills. This is due in part to the fact that most states’ K–12 standards and requirements overlook SFS, which is in stark contrast to those for state-funded pre-K programs.

In schools that *have* implemented strategies for developing certain skills for success, it is often difficult for outside observers, and even the schools themselves, to articulate their goals or to determine success in reaching them. To some extent, this is because it may be difficult to measure students’ SFS, particularly in a standardized, non-time-intensive manner. Discussions of how to assess them often lead to larger debates about whether they should be assessed at all, and, if so, how assessment information should be used.

## *A holistic approach to teaching and learning should not cease when students enter elementary school and later grades*

This paper describes why skills for success matter and what schools can do to bolster them. In addition, it offers recommendations for 1) how to assess whether schools and teachers are successfully supporting SFS; and 2) how policymakers and practitioners can promote a greater focus on SFS in schools, including holding schools and educators accountable for efforts in this area. As high-quality pre-K programs already strive to support the development and assessment of specific skills for success, these recommendations also highlight where promising early learning practices could be incorporated into traditional K–12 environments.

# WHAT ARE “SKILLS FOR SUCCESS” AND WHY SHOULD SCHOOLS FOCUS ON THEM?

This paper labels the diverse, habits, mindsets, and non-technical skills that can help individuals be more successful in all aspects and stages of life by what they accomplish: hence, “skills for success.” This is not an attempt to define which habits, mindsets, and non-technical skills are most important, but rather to create a framework for thinking about the various terms and definitions already used to describe them. Perhaps most commonly, they have been referred to as “soft skills,” which employers often use to describe the non-technical skills and abilities they desire in employees. In his popular book, *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough refers to these habits, mindsets, and skills as “grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character,” arguing that students who demonstrate characteristics like perseverance, inquisitiveness, conscientiousness, optimism, and self-control are best positioned to succeed in life.<sup>1</sup>

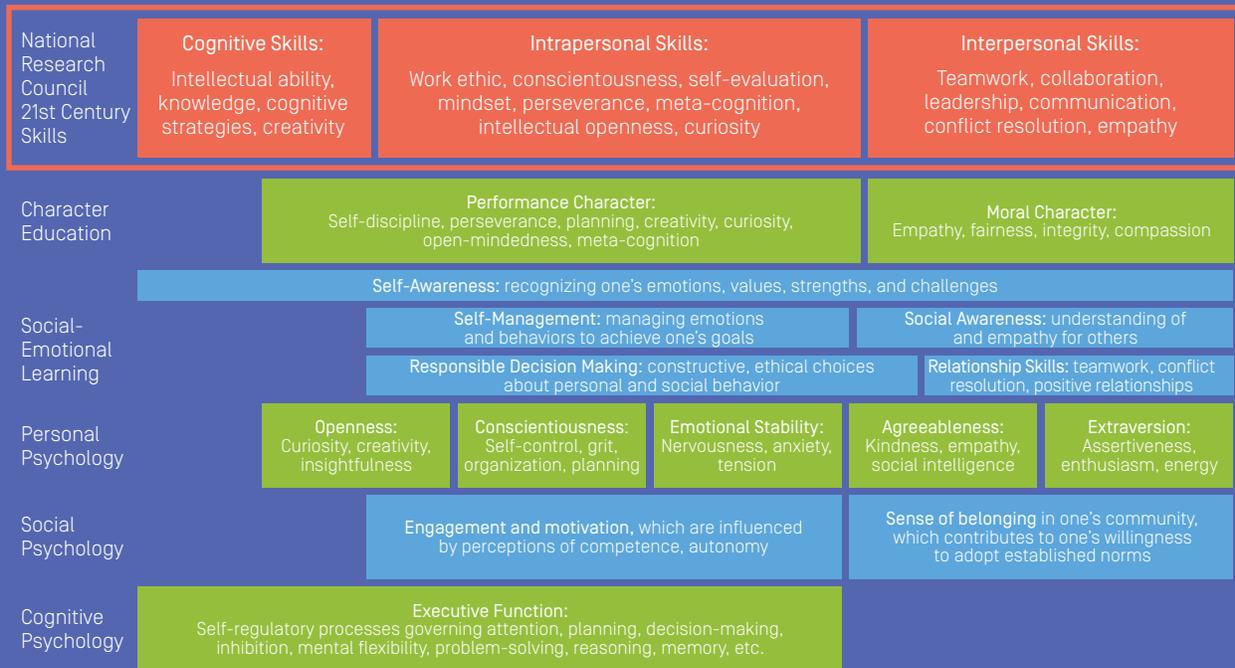
The early learning community commonly groups SFS into two complementary categories: social-emotional skills (socialization, self-confidence, self-regulation) and approaches to learning (curiosity, persistence, attentiveness, cooperation). When K–12 schools focus on these skills, there is less consensus on how they are talked about or which skills should be emphasized. For example, while some leading organizations and researchers in the field do use the term “social-emotional learning,” others talk about “academic mindsets,” “deeper learning,” or “21st century skills.” Each of these may focus on specific skills that others do not. For instance, “academic mindsets” encompasses a set of positive beliefs about one’s ability and potential to learn despite setbacks, while “21st century skills” include areas like leadership and adaptability to different situations, but neither encompasses both. (See Appendix for more examples of the various terms used to refer to these skills, along with the primary organizations and experts that use them.)

Despite this lack of consistency in terminology and specific skills, the skill areas emphasized by leading groups substantially overlap, with nearly all of them falling into three categories outlined by the National Research Council: 1) cognitive skills (such as critical thinking and non-routine problem solving), 2) interpersonal skills (such as complex communication and social skills), and 3) intrapersonal skills (such as adaptability and self-management).<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 1 for a visual representation.) It is this broad, diverse set of abilities that the phrase “skills for success” is meant to encompass throughout this paper. Based on our research, however, each unique approach or assessment focuses only on one or two categories, or on subsets of skills within one of these categories, primarily because the skills are so varied that they *require* tailored approaches and assessments.

For several reasons, building SFS is a role K–12 schools should play, whether education leaders choose to focus on strengthening students’ skills in a specific area or are ready to take on a broader set of skills. First, the possession of some of these skills has been shown to benefit academic achievement. Second, certain SFS are increasingly necessary for success in postsecondary and career settings. Finally, these kinds of skills are malleable, and research shows that schools *can* impact them.

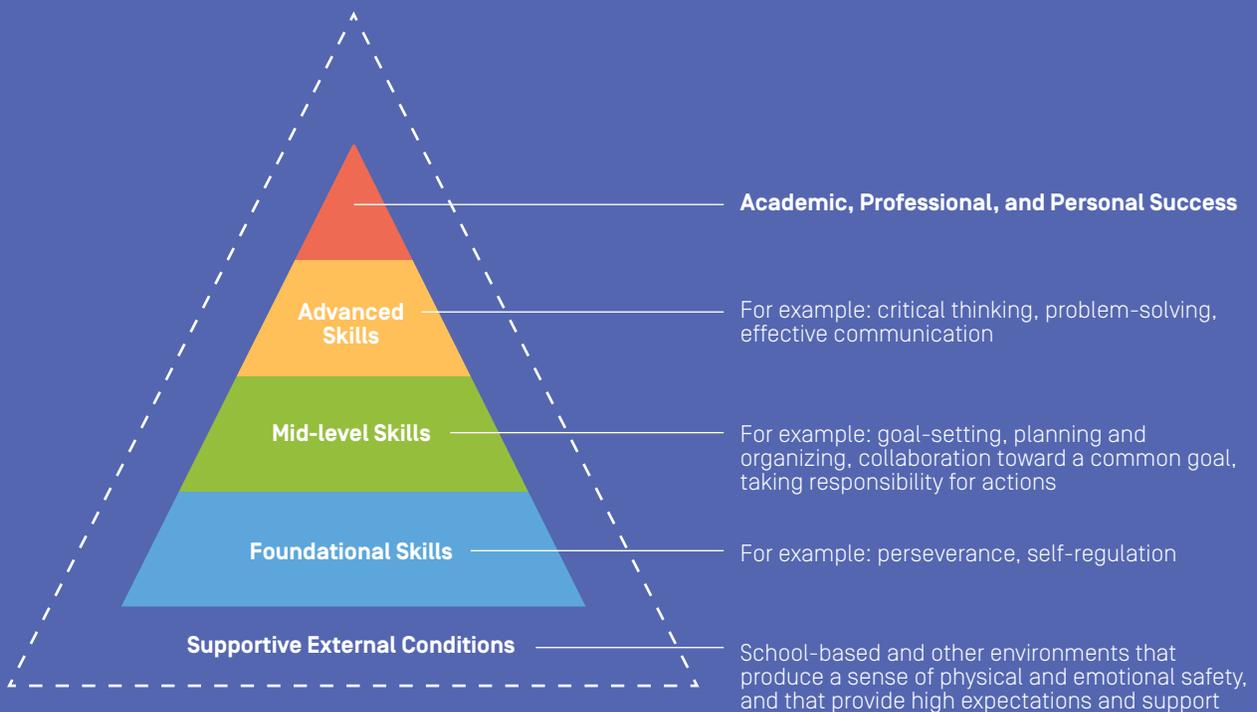
The most immediate reason for K–12 schools to try to help develop students’ skills in these areas is because many are positively correlated with academic outcomes, such as grades and test scores. A Research Triangle Institute overview of studies on the topic showed that students’ motivation, effort, and self-regulated learning—the ability to focus one’s personal resources toward achieving academic goals—all positively affect academic performance, as do self-sufficiency and academic self-

**Figure 1 | Categories of Skills for Success\***



\* Adapted from the California Office to Reform Education's amended request to the U.S. Department of Education for a waiver from elements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, May 1, 2014.

**Figure 2 | Sample Hierarchy of Skills for Success**



concept, which both reflect confidence and belief in one's ability to succeed academically. The paper's review of research on prosocial behaviors, such as cooperation, found a positive relationship to outcomes such as school completion, as well as peer acceptance, friendships, and occupational status.<sup>3</sup> In fact, some researchers have put forth the view that students' social, emotional, and physical needs must be successfully met in order to optimize learning.<sup>4</sup>

For example, because employees may work from different physical or virtual offices, there is a greater need for advanced communication and interpersonal skills.

Another reason for schools to focus on these skills is that a changing economy has transformed workforce expectations, and many students who may have easily found a job a few decades ago find themselves ill-equipped for the market today. One new expectation is the attainment of a postsecondary credential for most middle-income jobs. To succeed in most post-secondary programs, the ability to prioritize, plan, and employ critical thinking are key. In a recently released paper, New America's workforce education expert Mary Alice McCarthy explains that technological changes and globalization have resulted in new work demands.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1950s, educational researchers have recognized the need to cultivate a foundation of basic education skills in service of more advanced ones, and this is likely the case with certain SFS as well.<sup>6</sup> For example, while early learning programs tend to focus on self-regulation since it is developmentally appropriate to do so, this skill is a building block for other skills necessary for later academic and personal success, such as being able to follow directions, or ignore distractions to stay focused on the task at hand.<sup>7</sup> Psychologists such as Abraham Maslow explain that humans require basic physiological, safety, belonging, and self-esteem needs to be met before they engage in more academic and creative pursuits.<sup>8</sup> While any of these theories could be taken too literally, they provide an interesting framework for thinking about the order in which schools may be most successful in approaching SFS development. (Figure 2 provides one simplified representation of this potential hierarchy.)

Despite the fact that some foundational SFS should ideally be honed early in life, research demonstrates that these skills can still be developed through young adulthood.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, some skills may even be *more* easily learned or solidified at these later ages. Developmental psychologists

have found that students become better able to engage in sophisticated analysis, to control their actions, and to recognize the perspectives of others during the transition to adolescence. In fact, a study published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* found through brain imaging that the years around puberty may be a "sensitive period" for developing some of these skills, similar to that in early childhood for language development.<sup>11</sup>

Evidence also exists that schools can play a role in SFS development. Some school-based interventions attempt to directly teach SFS to students. A meta-analysis of school-based, universal social and emotional learning programs for kindergarten through high school students found significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance in participants relative to non-participants for teacher-led programs.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, research has found that educational initiatives that target "academic tenacity" (mindsets and skills that allow students to look beyond short-term concerns to longer-term goals, and to work through challenges to persevere toward these goals) can positively affect students' school experience and achievement months and even years later.<sup>13</sup> For example, middle school students struggling in math who were taught that working on challenging tasks helps them "get smarter," and who were taught how to apply this lesson to their schoolwork, improved their math performance relative to a comparison group that did not receive this intervention.<sup>14</sup>

### *Multiple studies have found that many dimensions of school climate are significantly associated with student academic, behavioral, and social-emotional well-being*

Other research has focused on how school and classroom environments, policies, and practices that promote positive teaching and learning conditions can bolster skills for success. These conditions are often referred to as "climate" or "culture" and include areas such as respectful interpersonal relations, physical safety and well-being, equity and fairness, and clear, high learning and behavioral expectations coupled with strong supports.<sup>15</sup> Multiple studies have found that many dimensions of school climate—such as environments that encourage student and staff input, and which are responsive to that

input—are significantly associated with student academic, behavioral, and social-emotional well-being.<sup>16</sup> Other factors that affect school climate include availability of supports and resources for students with extra needs, or fair and consistent discipline policies.<sup>17</sup> A positive school climate promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect, and mutual trust, which in turn improve the learning environment.<sup>18</sup> A recent study by WestEd found that California middle and high schools that were “beating the odds” on academic achievement compared to schools with similar student demographic profiles had significantly higher “climate indices” based on composite measures of supports and engagement (which included indicators such as simultaneous demonstration of high expectations and caring relationships), and in-school violence, victimization, and substance abuse.<sup>19</sup>

Even though many policies and practices for supporting SFS are fairly simple to put in place, convincing educators at every grade level to do so may be challenging. A survey by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) shows most teachers believe social-emotional skills are “teachable” (95 percent), but a notable portion (19 percent) do not believe schools should be teaching them.<sup>20</sup>

While the survey does not elucidate why teachers feel this way, some possible reasons are that they feel it is the job of families or of earlier grades to instill these skills, or they believe that it is more challenging to develop these skills

in older students. Data from CASEL’s survey appear to support these latter hypotheses. Over 70 percent of middle and high school teachers believed social-emotional learning (SEL) skills were “a big priority” for preschools and elementary schools, but the proportion of these teachers who think it is important in the school level they teach drops substantially: 63 percent of middle school teachers, and 42 percent of high school teachers.<sup>21</sup>

And while public support for schools imparting a wide array of SFS is generally high, parent resistance to schools focusing on some of these skills also poses a potential barrier.<sup>22</sup> Given some of the “indoctrination” fears voiced by opponents of the Common Core State Standards—which are purely content knowledge standards—it is reasonable to assume that some parents may hold concerns about a school attempting to form their children’s “character” or “mindsets.”<sup>23</sup>

Communicating the value of developing these skills across the PreK–12 grade continuum—and sharing the research that supports educators’ ability to do so—is essential for any state, local educational agency (LEA), or school that wants to prioritize SFS and academic learning. Additionally, involving teachers, parents, and the community in helping to identify the specific skills that students need and being transparent about the approaches taken to foster them will help head off potential concerns.

A close-up photograph of a young child with light brown hair and large, dark eyes. The child is wearing a yellow t-shirt and has their hands held up towards the camera, with fingers spread. Their hands are covered in colorful paint, primarily blue and orange. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green wall, suggesting a classroom or play area.

*Communicating the value of developing skills for success across the PreK-12 continuum is essential*

# APPROACHES TO BUILDING AND ASSESSING SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

In the following two sections, we outline some of the most commonly used, evidence-based strategies that schools and educators, both within pre-K and K–12, are implementing to try to bolster specific SFS, as well as methods for assessing these efforts. While these are based on a review of existing research and conversations with experts (including researchers, as well as state, LEA, and school leaders), inclusion of programs or assessments does not imply endorsement, nor does it imply that they are the only, or best, resources for developing or assessing SFS. These examples can, however, provide practitioners and policymakers with a basic understanding of the various ways to advance this work, including what approaches may be most often used in different contexts.

## Building Students' Skills for Success

The various approaches taken by schools and educators are guided by many criteria, including cost, ease of implementation, and time investment. The most important criteria, however, should be what the school hopes to accomplish in terms of student skills and outcomes, in both the short and long term, and the existence of research to support those goals. It is important for educators to select an approach that is likely to achieve those selected goals, using evidence to help guide those decisions. These approaches are implemented at both the individual classroom and school levels, as explained below.

### Classroom Approaches

Within classrooms, both in pre-K and K–12, there are three main types of approaches for imparting the skills necessary for academic, professional, and personal success: 1) a stand-alone approach, where a block of time is set aside for instruction specifically focused on

developing skills for success; 2) an embedded approach which attempts to integrate the development of these skills into the typical curriculum and/or routines; and 3) a hybrid approach, which includes both the integration that the embedded approach aims for as well as explicit skills instruction.

### Stand-Alone Approaches

The stand-alone approach typically uses a set curriculum and a direct instruction method for a defined number of lessons over a specific timeframe. More robust versions of this approach often include explicit skills instruction, including adult modeling, and opportunities for students to role play and practice the skills being discussed. Stand-alone programs are usually short-term, time-limited, and often focused on developing “social-emotional” skills (e.g., self-regulation, social problem-solving) and/or “academic mindsets” (e.g., goal planning, how to monitor goal progress, stress management).

While teachers or school counselors may choose to implement a stand-alone classroom approach on their own, school leadership is typically responsible for deciding to incorporate this approach into some or all of its classrooms, and for determining which program to implement.

One example of a stand-alone K–12 approach is the Tools for Getting Along program (TFGA), a 26-lesson, self-contained curriculum marketed as a tool to help fourth to sixth grade teachers reduce discipline problems by teaching students social problem solving.<sup>24</sup> A 2013 What Works Clearinghouse review of research on the approach found that fourth and fifth grade students in Florida randomly selected to participate in TFGA demonstrated statistically significantly greater use of rational problem-

solving styles than students who were not, although other targeted areas such as aggression and impulsiveness were not significantly impacted.<sup>25</sup>

Another increasingly well-known stand-alone K–12 program is a blended learning program from Mindset Works called Brainology.<sup>26</sup> The program is focused on changing students' beliefs about intelligence in order to improve their "academic tenacity" and resilience. Brainology targets fifth to ninth graders with online lessons and classroom activities about how the brain develops and learns, how students can grow their intelligence (a "growth mindset"), and strategies to use when encountering academic difficulties.<sup>27</sup> Although measuring changes in skills like academic tenacity is difficult, as the Assessment section will discuss further, research has found Brainology to have some positive impact on students' engagement, conduct, and academic performance.<sup>28</sup>

### Embedded Approaches

The embedded approach tends to incorporate efforts to impart skills for success into multiple aspects of the classroom, from academic content to the classroom environment and teachers' interactions with students, in order to create a more consistent focus on these skills that become part of everyday interactions. This approach differs from stand-alone approaches as it allows for students to practice skills in authentic situations throughout the day, as opposed to in more manufactured situations, such as role-playing.

In pre-K, the most widely-used curricula include an emphasis on certain SFS. For example, the HighScope curriculum promotes specific teaching practices—including the design of the schedule, the structure of the environment and materials in the room, and how the teacher responds and engages children—to help support children's development of social-emotional skills as well as other SFS.<sup>29</sup> This skill building is reinforced through HighScope's "plan-do-review" process, which provides opportunities through play for children to take initiative, set and meet goals, work with others, solve problems, and reflect. The HighScope Perry Preschool longitudinal study shows the best evidence of the curriculum's effectiveness. While the sample size was small, participants in the study experienced both improved positive social behaviors and academic performance. Study participants were followed through the age of 40, and those who experienced the

pre-K program were more likely to graduate from high school and had higher earnings than those who did not.<sup>30</sup>

Responsive Classroom (RC) is a K–6 program employing an embedded approach that strives to improve students' social skills, such as cooperation, responsibility, and self-control, in addition to traditional academic skills. It provides teachers with guiding principles, and 10 key practices for doing so, such as providing students with structured choices in their work and gathering students for a "morning meeting" each day to share news and interact. RC provides resources and training to help teachers incorporate these practices into their classrooms, which helps improve teachers' SFS in order to improve students' skills. Researchers found that students in third through fifth grade classrooms where RC was fully implemented performed better on math and reading tests than students in classrooms where it was not applied.<sup>31</sup> Sara Rimm-Kaufman, the lead researcher on the study, believes these results are due in part to improved classroom environments as well as "increased teacher confidence that students are capable of completing work that requires self-control and higher-order thinking." Together, these improvements lay the groundwork for students' mastery of such skills.<sup>32</sup> The creators of RC are planning to develop a model for middle schools as well.<sup>33</sup>

### Hybrid Approach

There are obvious pros and cons to both the embedded and stand-alone approaches. A recent research review found factors related to integration into daily school activities to be more beneficial to students' incorporation of SFS, including: when SEL programs were embedded in everyday interactions and school culture, and reflected collaborative efforts among all staff and stakeholders; were attentive to school areas beyond classrooms; and were intentional about continuously monitoring student behavior. The authors concluded that these findings point to the importance of embedding SEL into ongoing interactions and practices in schools.<sup>34</sup>

However, the same authors point to other research that finds that the most effective programs were those that: 1) included sequenced, active activities that connected to skills in a coordinated way, 2) focused on developing one or more social skills, and 3) explicitly targeted specific skills. Some of these aspects are likely easier to implement with a stand-alone/explicit instruction approach than an embedded one. Given this, a hybrid approach—combining

elements from both an embedded and standalone approach—may be the most effective model in many contexts, as it both delivers explicit skills instruction and integrates a focus on these skills throughout classroom and school practices.

*A hybrid approach may be the most effective model in many contexts, as it both delivers explicit skills instruction and integrates a focus on these skills throughout classroom and school practices*

In some cases, schools formerly using an embedded or stand-alone approach have moved to a hybrid approach. For example, although AppleTree Institute’s pre-K programs embedded social-emotional development in its curriculum, Every Child Ready, school leadership recognized that many students had limited foundational skills in these areas and felt it necessary to explicitly teach

them.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, those using a stand-alone approach may desire to convert to a hybrid approach if they believe that a more holistic emphasis is necessary. Some stand-alone approaches used in K–12 have begun to offer resources for creating a more comprehensive experience for students. One example is the aforementioned Brainology, which offers an online professional development course and other tools to help educators learn about the “growth mindset” and how to incorporate it into their daily practices.<sup>36</sup> The hybrid approach, while certainly more time and resource intensive, may allow schools to capitalize on the best of each: promoting integration in the classroom and school environment while also directly teaching and reinforcing the specific skills for success they are targeting, particularly where baseline student skill levels are low.

### **School-Wide Approaches**

Classroom approaches may be encouraged by school leadership, or may result from an individual teacher’s or group of teachers’ focus on promoting SFS. Responsive Classroom started out as a “teacher to teacher” model, where individual teachers within a school decided to use the approach and then got other teachers interested

**Figure 3** | Skills For Success Approaches: Levels of School Adoption



**Picture 1**  
In some classrooms, using approaches to develop SFS.



**Picture 2**  
In every classroom, using approaches to develop SFS. But not part of larger school’s policies and practices.



**Picture 3**  
Throughout the school, using approaches to develop SFS.

in trying it. Those schools look like **picture 1** in Figure 3: embedded approaches to skills happening in some classrooms, but not others. Students in such schools may experience different attitudes and expectations about how they should behave and what skills are important to focus on from each of the teachers with whom they interact.

Any of the classroom approaches discussed earlier—stand-alone, embedded, or hybrid—could be used school-wide. And it appears that there is increased K–12 interest in doing so. In the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of places opting to implement the Responsive Classroom approach school- or even district-wide, says Lora Hodges, the Executive Director of the Northeast Foundation for Children, RC’s developer. This change not only reflects growing interest in developing a more comprehensive set of skills for students, but also a growing understanding that promoting such skills has less impact if it is just happening in a few classrooms, and more impact if it is instituted school-wide, as in **picture 2** of Figure 3.

But even when school leadership requires an approach to be used in every classroom, school-level policies and practices may not enable the conditions and culture necessary to aid in the development of students’ SFS.

### *Current school-level policies and practices may not enable the conditions and culture necessary to aid in the development of students’ skills for success*

EdVisions Schools, a charter network of approximately 50 schools, embraces the idea that changing classroom principles and practices without also embedding them within the larger school (as in **picture 3** of Figure 3) is not sufficient to develop SFS.<sup>37</sup> To develop SFS, EdVisions deploys project-based learning, where a student explores a topic of interest for an extended period of time with coaching from his teacher(s), culminating in a final project, such as designing and modeling a house. The goal of this approach is to engage students more deeply in a specific topic of interest and help them develop skills for success.<sup>38</sup> But schools or LEAs that try to adopt these sorts of

approaches without rethinking broader policies and practices that impact student and staff mindsets and interactions will not fully realize the benefits, EdVisions Executive Director Keven Kroehler says.<sup>39</sup> He points to student and teacher autonomy, academic press, an orientation toward mastering goals, and a climate that promotes a sense of belonging as foundational for skill building in areas including engagement, motivation, and optimism for what the future holds. In schools that are serious about changing school-wide culture, these principles and goals are baked into all aspects of the institution, from the cafeteria to extracurricular activities.

In a 2012 literature review, Camille Farrington and her co-authors draw on prior research to support this view: “there is little evidence that working directly on changing students’ grit or perseverance would be an effective lever for improving their academic performance. While some students are more likely to persist in tasks or exhibit self-discipline than others, all students are more likely to demonstrate perseverance if the school or classroom context helps them develop positive mindsets and effective learning strategies.”<sup>40</sup>

Schools are attempting to build students’ skills for success in a variety of ways. To be clear, though, no approach will help students attain SFS if it is not clearly aligned with LEA and school needs and goals, understood and embraced by educators and the larger community, and implemented with fidelity. Additionally, because educator preparation programs have largely ignored strategies for developing SFS, teachers and school leaders will need high-quality in-service opportunities to learn how to do so. Do the schools have the knowledge and resources necessary to implement SFS approaches? How do schools or teachers know whether or not they are meeting goals? Are they, in fact, helping students build and strengthen their skills? The next section explores different types of assessments that can help answer some of these questions.

### **Assessing Students’ Skills for Success**

Schools can employ several different types of assessments, which they should already be using in other areas, to guide their work in developing students’ skills for success. These include 1) needs assessment, which drives decisions about strategies to reach SFS goals; 2) implementation assessment, which provides feedback on quality of strategy implementation and progress; and 3) outcomes assessment, which provides insight on whether goals are being met.<sup>41</sup>

## Figure 4 | System of Continuous Improvement

Data from needs, implementation, and outcome assessments may be useful on their own, but are most valuable when used together to create a system to drive continuous improvement.



Data from needs assessments, implementation assessments, and outcome assessments may be useful on their own, but they are most valuable when used together to create a system to drive continuous improvement.

CASEL’s rubric on school “sustainability factors” outlines this continuous improvement process, by defining an ideal level of functioning as one where the school “steering committee, including principal, is collecting both baseline and follow-up data on implementation practices (including teacher performance), student [social-emotional learning (SEL)] competency, and impact of SEL on school climate. Data is [sic] used to make appropriate adaptations to programming and to ensure fidelity to core elements of program. School shares all evaluation efforts with key school stakeholders and clearly documents lessons learned.”<sup>42</sup>

Educators and state- and district-level policymakers striving to assess these skills should ensure assessment approaches align with their goals and theory of action. More details on common or forward-thinking assessment strategies are outlined in the discussion below to help inform these decisions.

### ***Needs assessment***

The wide range of skills for success, and school and classroom conditions for promoting those skills, are likely too much for schools to tackle all at once. There is a lack of evidence to date for focusing directly on building certain skills, such as generosity, at all. This means that leaders within pre-K programs, schools, LEAs, and even states must decide where initial and ongoing efforts to build SFS should focus and what types of resources and approaches may best support those efforts. A *needs assessment* can help them do so.

In determining which SFS to prioritize, and which strategies to employ to meet those priorities, policymakers and practitioners must consider current student skill levels and how well the efforts already in place are supporting the development of these skills. Policymakers and practitioners must also reflect on the existing knowledge, skills, and resources in the schools and the new resources and training they will need to successfully impart these skills. In selecting and implementing goals, standards, instructional methods and/or assessments for a specified set of skills, policymakers and

practitioners should choose those that are developmentally appropriate.<sup>43</sup>

A needs assessment is likely to be most useful if it includes meaningful input from multiple stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, and the community. Additionally, while states or LEAs may have a multitude of SFS standards for a given grade span, for long-term success it may be wise to begin with a few of the most important, foundational skills in order to make the approach more palatable to educators, and to increase the likelihood of success.<sup>44</sup>

### **Implementation Assessment**

After determining a strategy for conveying selected skills for success, educational leaders must then put that plan into action. As they do so, they need to understand how well schools and educators are implementing that strategy, and the ongoing impact of those strategies. Despite a historical focus on imparting a more comprehensive set of skills for success, pre-K programs still conduct ongoing assessments of implementation since the strategy is only as good as how well it is carried out. Regularly assessing progress, and making changes as appropriate, is important to the success of any new effort in pre-K or K–12. Several *implementation assessment* approaches are explored below.

#### **School/Program Level Implementation Assessment**

Most assessment tools in this area are designed to measure aspects of school climate. Surveys are commonly used to assess aspects of a school's atmosphere that may impact SFS. The Center for Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center) at the American Institutes for Research identified at least 13 such surveys that display publicly-available evidence of being valid and reliable assessments of school climate.<sup>45</sup> One of these is the National School Climate Center's Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI). The survey is used to assess not only students' perceptions of a school's strengths and areas for improvement, but parents' and school personnel's perceptions as well.<sup>46</sup> CSCI measures 10 dimensions for students and parents, and 12 for staff, in four primary areas: school safety, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment.<sup>47</sup> It offers two versions of the student survey for different developmental levels (grades 3–5 and grades 6–12). While these types of surveys are unable to directly measure whether students' SFS are improving, they can help measure whether stakeholders are perceiving changes in behaviors as well as whether

the enabling conditions for SFS development are in place. These results can be used to inform a needs assessment or an assessment of implementation, depending on where the school or LEA is in the assessment cycle.

*School climate assessments can also be used to provide feedback to school leaders about areas of strength and growth within their own professional practice*

Another climate measurement tool specific to primary schools is High/Scope's Ready School Assessment (RSA), which assists leadership teams in gauging the school's ability to meet the needs of entering kindergartners, developing improvement plans to better meet the needs of those students, and measuring progress over time.<sup>48</sup> To meet these needs, the RSA includes a questionnaire as well as evidence collection in eight areas including: 1) leadership's prioritization of positive school climate; 2) alignment and coordination between pre-K and elementary school; 3) support for teachers; 4) engaging, warm, and inviting learning environment; 5) teaching in ways that children learn best; 6) building family, school, and community connections; 7) respecting diversity; and 8) school staff engagement in ongoing improvement based on information about classroom experiences, school practices, and children's progress. For the tool to be most effective, High/Scope recommends including multiple perspectives on the readiness assessment team, including teachers, principals, parents, and staff from feeder pre-K programs.

School climate assessments can also be used to provide feedback to principals and other leadership team members about areas of strength and growth within their own professional practice in areas that impact school climate. One example would be clearly communicating expectations for students and staff and providing supports to help meet those expectations.<sup>49</sup>

#### **Teacher-Level Implementation Assessment**

Because teachers play a leading role in helping students develop SFS, some LEAs, schools, and pre-K programs are also trying to assess teacher practice as a way to inform and drive implementation of approaches toward student acquisition of these skills.

Observations of teachers in action can provide insight into how well they are incorporating a school’s chosen approaches for bolstering students’ skills for success. They can also provide a picture of the classroom climate, such as how supportive the teacher is, how she manages students’ behavior, whether she challenges students, as well as whether students are encouraged to share and debate their ideas, in a respectful way.

One teacher observation tool is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which was first developed for pre-K, but now has developmentally-appropriate versions for each grade span through 12th grade. In pre-K and K–3, CLASS measures teacher-student interactions on three dimensions: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support (see Figure 5). For grades four through twelve, student engagement is included as an additional dimension.

**Figure 5 | CLASS Dimensions of Teacher-Student Interactions**

| <b>Pre-K and K–3</b>                         |                                |                                |                           |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Emotional Support</b>                     | <b>Classroom Organization</b>  | <b>Instructional Support</b>   |                           |
| Positive climate                             | Behavior management            | Concept development            |                           |
| Negative climate                             | Productivity                   | Quality of feedback            |                           |
| Teacher sensitivity                          | Instructional learning formats | Language modeling              |                           |
| Regard for student perspectives              |                                |                                |                           |
| <b>Upper Elementary and Secondary Grades</b> |                                |                                |                           |
| <b>Emotional Support</b>                     | <b>Classroom Organization</b>  | <b>Instructional Support</b>   | <b>Student engagement</b> |
| Positive climate                             | Behavior management            | Instructional learning formats | Active engagement         |
| Teacher sensitivity                          | Productivity                   | Content understanding          |                           |
| Regard for student perspectives              | *Negative climate              | Analysis and inquiry           |                           |
|  |                                | Quality of feedback            |                           |
|  |                                | Instructional dialogue         |                           |

\*Note that for upper elementary and secondary grades, CLASS measures “negative climate” under classroom organization instead of emotional support. Based on an analysis conducted by CLASS developers, negative climate was more closely aligned with the classroom organization domain than with emotional support for these grade levels. This could be because of an association between behavior management and negative climate in older students’ classrooms.<sup>50</sup>



*Schools could use teacher observation frameworks to provide feedback about areas where teachers are performing well or could improve in implementing skills for success practices*

Based on a growing body of research showing that the quality of teacher-child interactions matters a lot, CLASS is being increasingly used as a measure of pre-K program quality. In fact, several states require or suggest its use for monitoring state-funded pre-K programs and the federal government requires its use as a measure for monitoring Head Start programs. The developers of CLASS recommend that outside observers rate teachers because it generates more objective feedback. However, this does not always occur due to financial or scaling constraints, potentially diminishing the value of the measure.<sup>51</sup>

Some elements of teacher observation frameworks are more directly related to assessing approaches and practices focused on developing conditions and skills for student success than others. The GTL Center at the American Institutes of Research recently released a brief outlining 10 teacher practices that research indicates help promote students' SFS.<sup>52</sup> The GTL Center suggested that schools could use teacher observation frameworks, already included as a part of many schools' teacher

evaluation systems, to provide feedback about areas where teachers are performing well or could improve in implementing SFS practices into their classrooms. After comparing these 10 practices with three widely-used observation frameworks—CLASS, Danielson, and Marzano—they concluded that the “instructional practices that already are used to evaluate teachers are similar to the instructional strategies used to promote student social, emotional, and cognitive development.” However, these teacher observation frameworks sometimes include general wording, which allows for broad interpretation of what strategies may meet each criterion. In order for these frameworks to be tools that schools or LEAs can employ to assess implementation of SFS approaches, they will likely have to explicitly communicate which practices and approaches are expected to successfully meet each of the framework's criteria.

Most assessments of teacher practice in K–12 schools are performed by the school leader or a fellow district teacher, as compared to an outside observer, as is

commonly found in pre-K. Some systems also require or encourage teachers to reflect on their own practice and provide self-ratings as well. However, there is another approach to assessing teacher practice related to imparting SFS, that is becoming more frequently used in K–12 but is not practical with the youngest students: surveys of students’ perceptions of classroom environments and experiences.

TRIPOD is one of the most researched and well-known surveys of students focused on assessing individual classrooms’ environments and practices. Different versions are available for grades K–2, 3–5/6, and 6–12 that take into account students’ developmental levels. According to The Tripod Project, “surveys include items that are mainly observational (allowing students to record what they experience), rather than judgmental (asking students what they like and dislike).” For example, one question for secondary students asks them to rate the following statement on a range from “totally true” to “totally untrue”: “In this class, my teacher accepts nothing less than our full effort.”<sup>53</sup> Data are also collected on how students judge their own attitudes, behaviors and effort, as well as whether students feel safe, welcome, and satisfied with their progress in that classroom. Survey results can then be used in comparison with benchmarks from TRIPOD’s database to inform implementation and improvement: from where to focus teachers’ development to schools’ understanding of where SFS efforts are having an impact and where additional work may be needed.<sup>54</sup> The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s “Measures of Effective Teaching” study previously found that integrating TRIPOD survey results into teacher evaluation systems at an equal proportion to teacher observations and teacher impact on student learning increased validity and reliability.<sup>55</sup> Bellwether’s report, “Lessons from the Field,” further discusses how student surveys can be used for teacher evaluation and development. It also highlights the fact that 12 states currently require or allow for their use in this way.<sup>56</sup>

The University of Chicago has also been developing a survey assessment that attempts to measure sixth to twelfth grade students’ mindsets and attitudes in addition to teacher support, classroom environment, and engagement in content, with the goal of teasing out how much of certain student behaviors are influenced by classroom context. Expected to be available at the end

of 2014, the survey will be available free of charge in an effort to increase the availability of common measures across the field.<sup>57</sup>

## Outcomes Assessment

While data collection and reflection are critical for gauging impact and improving practice, the abstract nature of many SFS means that they do not easily lend themselves to measurement. For example, while it is easy to assess whether a student knows her multiplication tables, it is much more difficult to quantify her level of “grit.” But in recent years, the number of promising methods for assessing these skills in schools in viable ways has increased, as outlined below.

### School/Program-Level Outcomes

To more directly assess outcomes related to skills for success approaches, some LEAs and schools track existing data, such as disciplinary actions and attendance, often in conjunction with school climate surveys. Such approaches tend to look for trends over time, and tend to be rough, indirect tools for measuring whether more nuanced skills and habits for success are being developed. But they can provide concrete information that helps schools understand whether their approaches are having an impact in the short-term.

*In recent years, the number of promising methods for assessing skills for success in viable ways has increased*

Additionally, since it is difficult for schools to promote SFS in schools if students are not attending class, or are being disciplined with out-of-school suspensions, and so forth, these data can help schools determine where they may need to revisit policies and practices to ensure that students are in school and engaged, a necessary foundation for being successful in this work. Taking a longer-term view of their SFS strategies, some schools also review trends in school-wide grades, standardized state assessment scores, and on-time grade progression.

## **Student-Level Outcomes**

Schools use many of these same outcomes measures (e.g., discipline referrals) to track individual student progress on SFS. But again, these are proxy measures for the more habits, mindsets, and non-technical skills and habits schools are trying to impart. And, generally, K–12 schools have not incorporated other types of assessments to try to more directly measure individual students’ skills in these areas, except for a few—such as the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF)—which are typically administered only to children who appear to be demonstrating “atypical” development or behaviors that may require intervention.<sup>58</sup> However, as schools’ focus on SFS has grown, so have the approaches they are experimenting with to assess these skills.

By contrast, individual child assessment in high-quality pre-K programs measures several different skills for success. One thing to keep in mind is that young children are unable to read and respond to test questions independently, so assessment of math and literacy looks different than it does for older students. Assessors, most often a child’s teacher, typically administer academic assessments one-on-one and assessment of certain SFS, such as persistence or problem-solving, through observation.

In other domains, however, approaches used in pre-K have more in common with K–12 social-emotional assessment tools. These tools fall into two buckets (observational ratings and work product-based) and can be conducted by various individuals (teachers, other trained assessors, parents, or sometimes even the students themselves). Some of these methods are appropriate across the span from PreK–12th grade while others may work best for younger children or for older groups of students. Discussed below are some of the assessments currently used to measure individual students’ development of skills for long-term success.

### **Assessments Based On Observational Ratings**

Every day, teachers conduct observations of their students working, playing, and interacting with other students. Teachers may formally look for and document specific skills or behaviors students may demonstrate during certain activities. Teachers may also informally note how students engage with one another or respond

to tasks during the day. For instance, a teacher might notice that while Juan is usually the first one to turn in an assessment, he rarely checks his work. Typically, students are unaware that teachers are making these observations.

Teaching Strategies GOLD is one observational assessment tool commonly used from birth through kindergarten in several states. It is intended to help teachers understand children’s progress over the course of the year on 38 objectives within 10 areas of development and learning, including social-emotional and cognitive development. Teachers observe how children, for example, show flexibility in thinking, balance the needs of self and others, and respond to emotional cues. Teachers record their observations throughout the school year and rate children based on research-supported expectations of child development. These ratings provide formative information to teachers and parents about what their children know and are able to do. Teaching Strategies GOLD is currently being piloted for use through the third grade.<sup>59</sup>

## *Individual child assessment in high-quality pre-K programs measures several different skills for success*

While still rare, some K–12 schools are using observational approaches to assess student skills for success in later grades as well. For example, KIPP charter schools recently piloted a “Character Growth Card” in a handful of its middle schools in New York City.<sup>60</sup> Teachers are expected to use the growth card to review each student’s progress in demonstrating seven character strengths that research by Angela Duckworth, Chris Peterson, and Martin Seligman has highlighted as important for academic and lifelong success: zest, grit, self-control, optimism, curiosity, gratitude, and social intelligence.<sup>61</sup> Character Growth Card reviews are based on teachers’ overall interactions with students and are produced quarterly, to provide ongoing feedback on students’ performance.<sup>62</sup> The Character Growth Card is not used to determine whether a student will be promoted to the next grade, but it is designed to facilitate a dialogue among students, teachers, and parents around these seven character strengths. In addition to

assessing student skills in these areas, KIPP New York schools are undertaking efforts to educate students about these SFS and reward students who exhibit them. For instance, teachers create “dual purpose” history or literature lessons where they discuss character strengths exhibited by the people or characters involved. The KIPP schools also work to establish an environment where students praise their peers for exhibiting character strengths.<sup>63</sup>

The Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) is a multi-component PreK–12 program that offers both a performance screening tool—executed similarly to KIPP’s Character Growth Card—as well as a more in-depth assessment.<sup>64</sup> About a month into the school year, teachers can use the screening tool’s rubric to quickly categorize each student’s social skills into one of five categories based on performance and behaviors exhibited. This helps pinpoint certain skills for teachers and students to focus on throughout the year.<sup>65</sup> After a class-wide program to develop students’ prosocial skills—such as SSIS’ own, which focuses on the 10 social skills that a sample of teachers rated most important<sup>66</sup>—teachers are expected to administer the screener again to gauge progress. For students who continue to struggle with certain skills, the more in-depth SSIS rating system assessment provides forms for the teacher, student (if age eight or older), and even the student’s parent to complete. The rating system is used to more directly and thoroughly measure three areas of student function (social skills, competing problem behaviors, and academic competence) on 14 more specific dimensions, based on developmental research, to help teachers and parents determine which further interventions are necessary, if any.<sup>67</sup>

As with pre-K, K–12 observation-based student SFS assessment tools are intended to be used formatively to provide information to teachers, parents, and students about how students are performing on critical areas, and provide insight on areas that still need to be developed.

### **Assessments Based on Student Work**

Other assessments combine observations with samples of student work in an attempt to produce a more holistic assessment of students skills for success.

SFS assessment using work examples is rare, but it

is more common in K–12 schools than in pre-K. One example of an LEA that is trying to assess certain SFS via work examples is Farmington School District in Connecticut. With its “Spotlight Assessments,” Farmington focuses on evaluating one of the specific skills the district expects its students to demonstrate by graduation in each grade level. These are measured through teacher-scored performance on a variety of measurements geared toward the skill, such as performance tasks, essays, projects, and computer-based assessments. A report on what percentage of students at each grade level show mastery of the “spotlighted” skill is given to the community each year, through a Board of Education “Results and Outcomes” booklet and a Town Annual Report. Community members can therefore help monitor how students are developing their critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration, self-direction and resourcefulness.<sup>68</sup>

Some schools and LEAs use reviews of portfolios or presentations of student work to gauge students’ SFS, particularly at the high school level.<sup>69</sup> These typically focus on a particular skill or set of skills in-depth, primarily those within the “cognitive” and “interpersonal” domains, as opposed to those in the intrapersonal domain.<sup>70</sup> As with other types of assessments scored by teachers, there are challenges with scoring reliability even when clear scoring rubrics are available. This is less concerning when the assessments are used in a formative manner than when they are used to make high-stakes decisions, such as whether a student can progress to the next grade.

*As with pre-K, K-12 observation-based SFS assessment tools are intended to be used formatively to provide information to teachers, parents, and students about how students are performing on critical areas*

For 10th grade, Farmington is using the College & Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA), a performance task-based assessment used by approximately 280 high

schools nationwide, and beginning to be implemented in middle schools in 2014–15.<sup>71</sup> While CWRA questions are embedded within specific subject areas, they are designed not to measure core subject content knowledge, but critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication.<sup>72</sup> CWRA’s developer recommends the use of the assessment for understanding what skills students in grades in the lower part of the grade span need to develop before moving on to the next grade span, and for evaluating students at the end of the grade span to see whether schools met their goals.<sup>73</sup> Results are made available to students for measures such as “analysis and problem-solving,” “writing effectiveness,” and “critical reading and evaluation.”<sup>74</sup> In addition to providing students with feedback on how they compare to others taking the CWRA, this assessment is sometimes shared across grade levels so educators can make decisions about skills to focus on. Some schools, such as those in Virginia Beach City Public Schools, are beginning to include CWRA scores on students’ transcripts as well.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), one of the consortia of states developing evaluations aligned with Common Core State Standards (CCSS), has also been developing some performance task-based measurements that get at specific SFS. In addition to its “end of year” CCSS assessment, PARCC is creating a performance-based evaluation that will be administered three-quarters of the way through the school year, and provide formative feedback to teachers and schools about students’ reasoning and modeling skills, which are based in part on critical thinking, problem solving, and perseverance. However, as PARCC’S performance-based assessment attempts to evaluate these skills through math- and English Language Arts (ELA)-specific content questions, the measurement of students’ skills may not be generalizable beyond these content areas.

In 2015–16, schools using the PARCC CCSS assessment will have the option to adopt its “Speaking and Listening” formative assessments. Teachers administer the evaluation and score it using rubrics. The speaking portion will ask students to research a topic of their choice and present their findings to the class. For the listening portion, a student is exposed to stimuli and then expected to provide thoughts and ask questions. These formative assessments are what Doug Sovde, Director of Content and Instructional Supports at PARCC, referred to as “content agnostic,” as teachers can bring in disciplines other than ELA and math. These assessments can be taken multiple times per year so that

teachers and students can assess improvement on these communication and collaboration skills.

EdLeader21 is also in the process of creating a bank of performance tasks for use by schools and LEAs. It is hoping to launch a project where 40 to 50 LEAs agree to a common set of performance tasks so they can compare outcomes.<sup>75</sup> If benchmarking student SFS is a key goal, high schools can also opt to participate in the OECD Test for Schools, piloted in 2013, in which a sample of students is tested in math, reading, science and given a survey that asks about home background, which “assesses how students feel about their learning environment and the degree to they feel engaged in and motivated by their coursework and connected to their teachers.”<sup>76</sup> Participating schools receive a report detailing performance results compared to other schools that took the test, as well as strategies from across the country, and the world, that can help address areas of weakness.<sup>77</sup>

One word of caution: many work or task-based assessments attempt to get at “higher-order” skills for success, such as critical thinking. Research finds that some skills, like critical thinking, may not be easily transferred from one context to another, which makes them difficult to reliably assess in a summative way at the student level, unless they are measured in multiple contexts or if educators actively teach students how to transfer these skills to multiple situations.<sup>78</sup>

## Future Directions for Assessing Student Skills for Success

“Assessment may be intrusive or not. In other words, students may know that they are being assessed or it may be seamless with instruction—perhaps perceived by the students as nothing more than a chance to practice what they have learned,”—Ken Kay, of EdLeader21.<sup>79</sup>

As with most assessments, when a student, or adult for that matter, recognizes he is being assessed, he may behave differently.<sup>80</sup> Computer game-based evaluations, however, embed “invisible” assessment as part of the game. “By integrating assessment directly into the game environment, we eliminate observer effects and test anxiety; we can then evaluate intangibles such as creativity and problem solving,” note the authors of *Social Skills Assessment Through Games: The New Best Practice*.<sup>81</sup> Students think they are merely playing a computer game

when they are actually being measured for how they respond to social situations, for example. For the teacher, digital games have the potential to provide useful assessment data on a set of skills that is typically difficult to measure.

One such game-based assessment is Zoo U, developed by 3C Institute with funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Educational Sciences (IES).<sup>82</sup> Zoo U measures third and fourth graders in six social skill areas: emotional regulation, impulse control, communication, empathy, cooperation, and social initiation. During the game, students use a mouse to navigate a variety of social situations, such as a confrontation with a bully in the hallway or an assignment where they work with a classmate to solve a problem. The Zoo U assessment is currently being used in hundreds of classrooms across the United States and abroad, according to game developer Melissa DeRosier. She posits that computer games have the potential to make social skills assessment more affordable and less time intensive while providing more accurate and usable results for teachers and schools.<sup>83</sup> Based on 3C Institute research, Zoo U assessment correlates well with teacher reports on the social skills of the same students.<sup>84</sup>

Also with a grant from IES, researcher Clark McKown has created a web-based tool, SELweb, to assess four dimensions of K–3rd grade students' social emotional development: emotional recognition, perspective taking, social problem solving, and self-control. Students take the assessment independently on a computer. For emotional recognition, for example, students are presented with a series of faces with different expressions and are asked to indicate what each person is feeling. For perspective taking, students watch narrated vignettes and try to infer the speakers' intentions. SELweb has been field- tested in Illinois with more than 4,000 students. "Because of the state's SEL standards," said McKown, "there was interest from several schools to have a tool to help them make decisions." The assessment also includes a peer nomination component. For the peer nomination, students see a screen with each of their classmate's names and pictures. They respond to several questions about their classmates, such as who they most like to spend time with. The data collected are used to create a social network map of the class and can help teachers recognize cliques and socially isolated children, and make decisions about the best seating arrangements or groups. SELweb is being rolled out across the country to develop national norms.<sup>85</sup>

*Students may know when they are being assessed or it may be seamless with instruction—perhaps perceived as nothing more than a chance to practice what they have learned*



# USING ASSESSMENTS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SCHOOLS

The primary uses of SFS assessments are to 1) obtain a snapshot of students' skills and school and educator efforts to develop them; 2) measure where improvements have been made and where opportunities to improve still exist; and 3) promote accountability for improvement.

Following are some considerations and examples that can help guide policymakers' and practitioners' efforts in the latter two areas. Above all, measurement tools must only be used for the purpose(s) for which they were designed. For example, screening tools should be used to identify whether a child is at risk for or exhibiting signs of developmental delays, and not to measure a child's skill level in a specific area. Another general consideration is developing a realistic understanding of the necessary time and resource commitment to acquire the level and quality of information desired, and attempting to find a satisfactory balance between the two.

## Using Assessments for Improvement

K–12 assessments of SFS have primarily been used at the school or classroom level, in order to identify and drive the improvement of environments and practices. Data from needs assessments can help determine which approach(es) to take to bolster students' SFS. But before that strategy is rolled out, education leaders at the federal, state, and local levels must ensure that educators have the skills and resources necessary to do the work in order to ensure fidelity to the approach.<sup>86</sup> Realistically, the majority of educators will need substantial training and coaching on how to best promote skills for success in their classrooms and schools: in a recent survey of educators, less than half of respondents believed that their teacher training adequately prepared them to engage and motivate students.<sup>87</sup>

The same is true for using assessments. LEAs and schools must determine whether expertise exists to carry out assessments in an accurate and consistent way. They also must ensure that educators have the skills to use assessment data to identify and address areas of weakness identified at the student, educator, and school level, and if not, determine a plan for developing or accessing that expertise. Given evidence that most educator preparation programs are not sufficiently preparing students to interpret results from assessments that are already commonly administered in schools, it is likely that substantial training will be necessary.<sup>88</sup>

*The majority of educators will need substantial training and coaching on how to best promote skills for success in their classrooms and schools*

There is a variety of resources available to help schools in these efforts. For example, the University of Virginia's Center for the Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) has developed a suite of resources: the aforementioned CLASS can help identify areas for improvement, while My Teaching Partner is a targeted coaching model that provides insight on how to improve emotional support, instructional support, and classroom organization. Together, these resources focus on specific ways for teachers to build positive relationships and teach effectively, like being responsive to students' needs and setting clear expectations.<sup>89</sup> And while some self-assessments<sup>90</sup> of teaching practices and competencies that promote skills for success exist, assessment research

indicates that “the skills that engender competence in a particular domain are often the very same skills necessary to evaluate competence in that domain.” That is, people do not accurately rate themselves on dimensions in which they are lacking, or for which others in their immediate context are lacking.<sup>91</sup>

## Using Assessments for Accountability

To date, skills for success assessment data have not typically been shared with entities that would encourage or require schools or educators to take specific actions (including improvement) based on the results. As a result, much of what we know of SFS accountability “best practices” comes from assessment research rather than examples in the field, leaving many questions unanswered.

In terms of validity and reliability, assessment ratings are only as good as the tool being used and the skills of the rater. Policymakers and practitioners, therefore, should be confident about these before deciding to use a specific tool for accountability purposes. Some types of ratings are less accurate, and should not be used for accountability purposes at all. For example, self-assessments by teachers may be useful to promote self-reflection and growth, but not to determine teachers’ actual performance in cultivating student SFS. And, according to Camille Farrington, “student surveys are not useful for diagnosing *individual* students’ skill development if you want them to be honest and objective—although they can be useful in the aggregate for understanding students’ perspectives.”<sup>92</sup> Only summative assessment tools that have been empirically validated should be used for formal “evaluation” of student skills or educators’/schools’ ability to impart them. Ideally, student assessments used for accountability purposes should be benchmarked to a LEA, state, or national norm, rather than allowing for relative comparisons of students within classrooms or individual schools.

But even if a particular assessment is valid and reliable, does it make sense to use it to hold students accountable for developing the associated SFS or to hold teachers and/or schools accountable for imparting them? And if so, what is a smart approach to doing so?

While the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal policy in 2001 increased external accountability of K–12 schools, schools were only held accountable for student performance on statewide

academic proficiency tests in math and reading/English language arts. Most recently, under optional waivers from NCLB, states have increased flexibility to design their own accountability systems, but are still required to hold schools accountable for student achievement in at least math and reading. While states have made few efforts to incorporate skills for success into these new K–12 accountability systems to date, educators and policymakers who are unhappy with current school accountability systems are promoting doing so. For example, in a report targeted to a policy audience, Stanford professors David Conley and Linda Darling-Hammond described how the inclusion of measures of SFS in accountability systems will provide a more comprehensive view of the value that schools are providing.<sup>93</sup> The Ounce of Prevention Fund has also called for expanding the range of child outcomes included in education accountability systems, from early childhood through 12th grade, to incorporate the measurement of SFS.<sup>94</sup>

*But even if a particular assessment is valid and reliable, does it make sense to use it to hold students accountable for developing the associated SFS or to hold teachers and/or schools accountable for imparting them?*

Before deciding if and how to hold schools accountable for helping students develop these skills, policymakers must consider several important questions. Current debate about accountability systems based on academic outcomes reflects ongoing tension between a desire for equity—that accountability systems must ensure that schools help all students achieve high standards and successful outcomes—and a desire for fairness—that accountability systems must take into account the fact that schools serve students who arrive at different levels and with varying needs. Parallel to this debate is the question of whether accountability for SFS should take into account schools’ progress in this area as opposed to their raw performance. Should the schools’ stage of implementation be taken into account? And if so, how could it be done in a way that ensures all schools meet the same ultimate goals within a reasonable period of time?

*If these skills and positive learning environments are not treated as important initiatives that are being monitored by outside stakeholders, educators push them to the side to focus on those areas that school and educator accountability systems are based on*

Despite these questions, because school and classroom environments and practices can play such an important role in aiding development of many types of SFS, it is difficult to argue that these should be completely overlooked in school and educator accountability systems. In fact, American Institutes for Research has found that valid and reliable surveys can be useful in assessing the degree to which principals have improved school climate as one of several outcomes measured in school leader performance evaluations.<sup>95</sup>

Additionally, the evidence from K–12 SFS implementation to date indicates that if these skills and positive learning environments are *not* treated as important initiatives that are being monitored by outside stakeholders, educators push them to the side to focus on those areas that school and educator accountability systems *are* based on (e.g., standardized tests).<sup>96</sup> Including certain skills for success in accountability systems could encourage schools not currently making them a priority, especially those serving low-income and minority students, to do so.

Pre-K programs provide several examples of outside monitoring and accountability related to classroom climates that promote student SFS. Tools, such as CLASS discussed earlier, are used by states to monitor the quality of publicly funded pre-K programs. One of the ways these kinds of tools measure climate is through observing the language used and demeanor demonstrated by classroom teachers. For example, do teachers accept and respect student opinions during class discussions?

There has been some movement toward inserting a

focus on skills for success into K–12 school and educator accountability systems. For example, Colorado’s principal evaluation rubric requires evidence of “school cultural and equity leadership,” including elements such as creating an inclusive and collaborative climate, and demonstrating a commitment to promoting a comprehensive set of student SFS.<sup>97</sup> Even where states are not moving in this area, some LEAs are. For example, Farmington Public Schools’ teacher observation rubric ensures that teachers are evaluated on their classroom approach to and integration of district-selected student SFS. And the most well-known accountability system attempting to incorporate SFS is a consortium of seven large LEAs in California, referred to as the California Office to Reform Education, or CORE. The only group of LEAs to win a U.S. Department of Education waiver from certain No Child Left Behind requirements, CORE has proposed incorporating social-emotional and school climate domains as key factors in its accountability and improvement ratings, in addition to academic outcomes. A school that performs poorly on the overall measure will be paired with a higher-performing school to focus on areas for improvement. However, there are minimal external incentives for schools to improve (e.g., consequences for a lack of progress) or focused resources to aid them in doing so. Without these, research on accountability policies indicates that CORE’s chosen strategy is unlikely to be effective in driving improvements in school performance.<sup>98</sup>

The most viable way to ensure a focus on these skills may be to find middle ground between minimal accountability and “high-stakes” accountability, using evaluative systems primarily focused on making school performance in areas related to SFS transparent to the public. However, this type of accountability will not be strong enough if not executed in a very intentional way. For example, a recently enacted California K–12 school finance law requires LEAs to engage with parents, educators, employees, and the community to develop an annual Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) to outline how they intend to meet eight state priorities—which include school climate, pupil engagement, and parental involvement—and district goals in these areas.<sup>99</sup> Each plan describes the school district’s overall vision for students and annual goals, and the specific actions it will take to achieve the vision and goals.

One issue with the LCAP model is that, to some extent,

it requires parents and community members to be aware that certain skills and habits are important for their children's success and hence, areas they should be pushing for schools to develop. As a result, some LEAs' LCAPs are making these skills a priority and adopting more innovative practices. Berkeley Public Schools (BPS) is creating a social-emotional curriculum for grades K–6 which will focus on areas such as self-management, decision-making, and relationship skills, and have set growth goals for the percentage of students with an average score on the social-emotional domains section of their report card.<sup>100</sup> However, other LEAs' LCAPs reflect a narrower focus and the use of more traditional methods: some of Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) primary "climate" goals are to reduce suspensions and chronic absenteeism by adding academic and social-emotional counselors and other support personnel.<sup>101</sup> The traditional strategies selected by LAUSD may actually be more beneficial to its students than the strategies selected by BPS. But they also raise the question of whether a system that relies on community knowledge of these skills' importance may unintentionally reproduce parental privilege or lack thereof in its plans for developing them. For example, media outlets, such as the New York Times, cover new research on evidence-based approaches to develop certain SFS, however, such information may be less accessible for parents, especially low-income parents, who do not read or may not have access to these sources.

*Factors such as classroom environment and relationships with specific teachers and peers can impact individual students' demonstration of SFS. This means that a student who performs well on a certain skill in one classroom or context may not do so in another*

Additionally, while the expectation is that providing annual benchmarks will assist LEAs and the community to monitor the progress of the plan, the format and

language used in the LCAPs themselves are currently not very parent- and consumer-friendly. They include, for instance, multiple pages of tables and the use of terms like "Individual Culmination Plan." There are also few details about what format monitoring reports will take or how they will be communicated to the community. As a result, it is difficult to imagine that LCAPs in their current incarnation are a sufficient middle-ground accountability solution. Despite the system growing out of a theory of action based on meaningful public input and transparency, the design and execution of the system seems unlikely to achieve either of these goals. Thus, policymakers must think carefully about how to inform the design of implementation as well.

### Thinking about Accountability for Students

Factors such as classroom environment and relationships with specific teachers and peers can impact individual students' demonstration of SFS.<sup>102</sup> This means that a student who performs well on a certain skill in one classroom or context may not do so in another. While the importance of context is another reason to attempt to measure classroom and school climate, it is also a reason to be cautious about attempting to measure individual students' SFS with precision for accountability purposes. Additionally some educators voice concerns about assessing SFS in a way that "counts" for students may diminish students' implicit motivation for trying to attain them.<sup>103</sup>

But one could imagine report cards for all students reflecting performance on specific skills for success—similar to those that KIPP New York has implemented, or to the progress reports that youngest children receive—as a helpful way to communicate the importance of these skills to students, families, and educators. Additionally, figuring out ways to measure "growth" in addition to raw skill levels may actually help to *increase* student motivation.

# GOVERNANCE: ROLES FOR FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL ENTITIES

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Schools and classrooms are where the lessons take place that directly influence students' mindsets, habits, and skills for success. But national, state, and local entities can and often do play a role in influencing those practices. Developing age-appropriate SFS is currently a much greater and more widespread focus among pre-K programs than for K–12 schools. As outlined below, this is in part a result of federal and state efforts to ensure that these skills are included in pre-K programs, efforts that are not as common for K–12 schools.

## Federal Government

Flagship federal programs that include a robust focus on skills for success exist in early education, but not at the K–12 level. Take Head Start: the federal government develops the program quality standards, the framework for program content and practices, provides funding, and monitors program quality. With \$8.6 billion in current funding, Head Start, the country's largest pre-K program, serves about one million children in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Head Start's framework has a focus on SFS, including developing "a child's ability to regulate attention and behavior and in turn, develop greater social, emotional, and cognitive competence."<sup>104</sup>

However, when there have been federal incentives or investments in building skills for success in K–12, they have historically been optional and disconnected from schools' primary work of teaching and learning. For example, instead of being an integral part of primary elementary and secondary education policies like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), federal efforts have mostly been through small—and in some cases, now defunct<sup>105</sup>—programs.

For example, the U.S. Department of Education recently awarded about \$40 million in School Climate Transformation grants to LEAs and states to implement

evidence-based approaches for improving behavioral outcomes and learning conditions for students.<sup>106</sup> This initiative, which funds only 71 of the roughly 14,000 LEAs nationwide, in 12 states, attempts to help schools develop consistent rules, consequences, and reinforcement of appropriate behavior for all students, along with more targeted supports for students exhibiting or at risk of troubling behavior.<sup>107</sup> While it is essential that schools provide safe, consistently-structured environments and non-academic supports to students who need them, this program does not touch on other important aspects of "school climate," such as supporting positive relationships within the school or focusing on promoting some of the mindsets and habits that are important for lifelong success.

*When there have been federal incentives or investments in building skills for success in K–12, they have historically been optional and disconnected from schools' primary work of teaching and learning. For example, instead of being an integral part of primary elementary and secondary education policies like ESEA, federal efforts have mostly been through small—and in some cases, now defunct—programs*

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in promoting skills for success beyond the boundaries of student behavior in schools from federal legislators. For example, in 2011 and 2013, Representative Thomas Petri (R-WI) introduced the 21st Century Skills Readiness Act in the House. This bill amends ESEA to “support 21st century readiness initiatives that fuse core academic subject knowledge and higher-order thinking skills (such as critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation) to ensure that students are prepared for postsecondary education and careers, upon graduation from secondary school.” The bill takes a comprehensive approach to incorporating skills for success into federal policy, by focusing on these skills as a strategy for school reform and dropout prevention under Title I, as a requirement of educator professional development under Title II, and as competencies that must be regularly assessed under Title VI policy.<sup>108</sup> In 2014, Representative Susan Davis (D-CA) introduced the Supporting Emotional Learning Act, which requires federal research on the impact of social and emotional education and “technical assistance regarding the use of scientifically valid teaching methods and assessment tools in imparting social and emotional life learning.” The Act would amend the Higher Education Act to ensure that teacher preparation programs help prospective teachers better understand the research on social-emotional learning and can employ this knowledge in their practice. However, the current Congress is not expected to move either of these bills forward.

## States

Standards development is a primary function of states for both early education and K–12 programs. All states’ early learning standards (birth-to-school entry), typically required for state-funded pre-K programs but optional for other pre-K programs, are broad. Most include not only cognitive domains—such as early literacy, numeracy, and science—but also social-emotional development, and “approaches to learning,” which includes initiative, curiosity, persistence, attentiveness, and cooperation. States also often include guidelines for creating positive learning environments that support social-emotional learning and certain other SFS.

In contrast, while all 50 states have K–12 *academic content standards*, only three states (Illinois, Kansas, and Pennsylvania) have K–12 social-emotional learning

standards with student indicators at each grade level. Two states (Washington and Idaho) have such standards for grades K–3, Connecticut is in the process of developing K–3 standards for “social and intellectual habits,” and a handful of others have at least a few standards for at least one grade span that address skills such as problem solving, healthy decision making, and communication.<sup>109</sup> Illinois is the only state which mandates skills for success standards be incorporated as part of the state’s K–12 overall learning standards, as is common with early learning standards.<sup>110</sup>

*In an education system that is based on local control, tension exists between making SFS standards mandatory versus optional. How prescriptive an approach should be will likely depend on the level at which the approach is determined*

But even in states that have developed K–12 standards for SFS, schools are not always required to focus on them. In these states, such as Kansas, the standards are instead viewed as guidance. As a result, states may offer training and resources to LEAs and schools, but these are also often optional undertakings for educators.

In an education system that is based on local control, tension exists between making SFS standards mandatory versus optional. How prescriptive an approach *should be* will likely depend on the level at which the approach is determined. For example, a state-level approach that attempts to be too prescriptive could risk being viewed as yet another top-down initiative by schools and becoming compliance-driven instead of authentically adopted and implemented. However, there is also an inherent danger in not providing any guidelines or objectives for what schools should be striving for or any accountability for taking steps toward these goals. If a state wants to ensure that every school focuses on developing these skills in all of its students, it needs to provide ample direction and incentive for doing so. (See case study on page 30 for more details about Kansas’ attempt to balance mandatory and voluntary components within its SFS focus.)

## Skills for Success for the Willing or for All? A Case Study of Kansas

Kansas provides an insightful example of the tension inherent in balancing local autonomy and widespread, substantive implementation of approaches for growing students' skills for success. In 2012, Kansas adopted statewide Social Emotional Character Development (SECD) standards drawing on the Character Education Partnership's 11 Principles of Effective Character Education and CASEL's Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies. The SECD standards outline "model essential personal life habits that contribute to academic, vocational, and personal success" for students to learn, practice, and model.<sup>111</sup> However, as they are considered "model standards," LEAs can opt to work toward them or not, meaning that not only does Kansas not require a *specific* approach for schools to help students achieve these habits, it does not require *any* approach.

Kansas' rationale for this decision is that – as a local control state, where school boards and superintendents choose what curricula to follow – making the standards mandatory could be seen as state overreach. This line of reasoning is unfounded given that many states do mandate academic content standards without requiring specific curricula or instructional materials. Meg Wilson, former co-chair of Kansas' SECD Standards Committee, and the current principal of Hoisington High School in central Kansas, notes that efforts to implement SFS gain greater buy-in and more successful implementation when students and educators are part of the development process for their individual school. "It's important that all schools and LEAs have some say in the development of their [school's] principles" to ensure "a common language that students and staff speak together," she said.<sup>112</sup>

The absence of requirements has been SECD's greatest challenge, says Noalee McDonald-Augustine, also a former co-chair of Kansas' SECD Standards Committee, and currently an educational consultant at one of the state's service centers. She said, "there are individuals who don't want to invest the time if it's not required," particularly since some educators "believe schools have no business teaching these skills and that this is an issue that should be dealt with in the home." At the same time, many other educators are not even aware of the SECD standards, and the state does not have a formal method to track which LEAs have chosen to implement them.<sup>113</sup>

At the moment, Kansas' approach appears to be falling short of providing all students with opportunities to develop the habits and skills necessary for academic and lifelong success. However, the state has a new school accreditation process in development that may strike a better balance between prescriptiveness and flexibility for SECD.<sup>114</sup> If Kansas follows through on its ESEA waiver plan, in 2015–16 it will begin requiring evidence of school effort and performance on a broad set of measures which it refers to as the "5 R's": responsive culture, relevance, relationships, rigor, and results. Adoption and implementation of SECD is expected to be one way that schools could demonstrate they are meeting expectations on the "responsive culture" metric. Doing so, McDonald-Augustine says, could better focus schools and educator preparation providers on helping students develop these skills. Whether it does will depend on whether Kansas designs the accreditation system in a way that requires schools to provide strong evidence of their "responsive culture" and the state's willingness to put consequences in place for schools that fail to do so.



*Even when state policies “require” K–12 adoption of SFS standards or implementation, as with any educational practice, there are obstacles to ensuring they are implemented well*

Other states are beginning to require LEAs or schools that they deem in need of significant improvement to train on, implement, and/or assess skills for success, as Illinois has planned for its school improvement system. In 2013, Illinois also put new administrative rules into effect which require its educator preparation programs to incorporate training on the state’s social and emotional learning standards in order to gain state program approval.<sup>115</sup>

Even when state policies “require” K–12 adoption of SFS standards or implementation, as with any educational practice, there are obstacles to ensuring they are implemented well. For example, as a result of the Children’s Mental Health Act of 2003, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) adopted the Illinois Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards.<sup>116</sup> However, whether standards are ultimately incorporated into educational programming within schools and classrooms is only monitored at the local level. And, “with schools’ primary improvement planning focus being on academic performance, in a large part due to the previous No Child Left Behind’s goals and interventions, teachers have tended to continue focusing greatly on academics, as well,” explains Michele Carmichael, Principal Consultant, Schools and Behavioral Health Support at ISBE.<sup>117</sup>

Implementation may be particularly challenging when the people responsible for academics and school improvement are not the same as (or are not working closely with) those responsible for standards and approaches to develop K–12 SFS. In particular, the state agency(ies) in charge of SFS standards often influences whether K–12 educators will act on them. Historically, many states’ (and LEAs’) work in this area has been housed in departments focused on mental health or overall well-being, or in a division of the Department of Education that is not tightly connected to instruction or school improvement. For example, in Idaho, the K–3 social-emotional development standards are housed in the Department of Health and Welfare, and while Kansas’ Department of Education “owns” its Social Emotional Character Development standards, the Education Counseling arm of its Learning Services division heads up this work.<sup>118</sup> As a result, teachers and school leaders are less likely to be aware of the standards or to believe that they are directly related to their academic work. This is less of an issue with pre-K, because all of the state’s early learning guidelines, both content *and* SFS standards, fall within the purview of one state agency.

Another role for states is monitoring and accountability. Both early education and K–12 have only begun to scratch the surface in this area when it comes to skills for success.

For K–12, states do play a significant role in monitoring schools’ and LEAs’ progress on *academic content* standards, and holding them accountable for reaching stated academic achievement goals. Recently, a few states have also begun to explore systems for monitoring LEAs’ and/or schools’ focus on bolstering SFS. For example, Illinois has instituted a statewide survey of schools assessing five indicators which research has shown to be important for student success, including a supportive school environment.<sup>119</sup> The state has also taken steps to incorporate items related to developing students’ skills for success within educators’ evaluation ratings. But while a few states include information on conditions for school success on school report cards,<sup>120</sup> such as number of disciplinary actions,<sup>121</sup> it does not appear that any use this information yet to trigger action, including determining where to provide technical assistance or training.

*LEA-level standards or “visions” may better reflect the goals and context of local communities than state-level efforts, easing the process of bringing educators and parents on board with implementation. However, as is the rationale behind statewide academic content standards, creating statewide SFS standards can ensure a common, minimum level of skill attainment for all students in the state, not just those in LEAs that independently choose to prioritize this work*

## Local Education Agencies

Local Education Agencies (LEAs)—and larger pre-K providers, such as Educare Network, Head Start grantees overseeing multiple programs, and AppleTree Institute—also play a role in setting a common agenda for skills for success for the schools or programs in their purview. For example, some LEAs in states without SFS standards, particularly large ones like Anchorage School District in Alaska, have created their own standards for what skills students are expected to master, often with indicators of what demonstration of mastery looks like for each grade level or span.<sup>122</sup>

Other LEAs, such as Farmington Public Schools in Connecticut, have worked with the community to identify skills important for their students to attain for academic and personal success, and then worked backwards to align all systems—grade-level curricula, professional development, assessments, and so forth—to this vision.<sup>123</sup> In addition to setting goals and expectations, these LEAs, as with larger pre-K operators, are often creating and/or providing training and resources to educators on strategies for incorporating these skills into classrooms and schools, and monitoring the success of implementation. Like states, LEAs sometimes incorporate monitoring information into systems for holding schools and educators accountable as well.

LEA-level standards or “visions” may better reflect the goals and context of local communities than state-level efforts, easing the process of bringing educators and parents on board with implementation. However, as is the rationale behind statewide academic content standards, creating statewide SFS standards can ensure a common, minimum level of skill attainment for all students in the state, not just those in LEAs that independently choose to prioritize this work. State-level consistency also means that states can develop trainings and resources to support all LEAs and schools as well as put in place systems to monitor implementation and outcomes. The best approach may be consistency at the state level with some flexibility at the LEA level to reflect local needs. One way to do this would be to develop state model standards and allow LEAs to select from a menu of approved implementation approaches and assessments.

# ARE THERE OPPORTUNITIES TO BORROW PRACTICES FROM EARLY EDUCATION FOR LATER GRADES?

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To date, many K–12 educators have not seen development of student’s SFS as a priority. This view has been reinforced by standards, assessment, and accountability policies at the federal, state, and local levels that place a premium on reading and math achievement in third through twelfth grade. In many places this narrow focus has pushed down to first and second grade and in some cases even kindergarten and pre-kindergarten as administrators and teachers feel pressured to ensure students meet later grades’ accountability goals. But the research on early childhood development contradicts this trend, emphasizing instead the need for both children’s SFS development and academic learning.<sup>124</sup> Taking a page from early education programs could help elementary, middle, and high schools create positive learning conditions that help students to not only be socially and emotionally competent and flexible thinkers, but also achieve academically at high levels. Below are some early education ideas that perhaps should be “pushed up” to positively affect learning in elementary and secondary schools.

In early education (birth-to-school-entry) many SFS are woven into standards, assessments, and accountability systems. As with K–12, state early learning standards for pre-K include standards for numeracy, literacy, and other content areas, but they also include standards for maintaining self-control, interacting positively with others, managing emotions, exploring curiosities, and persisting on a challenging problem. Additionally, opportunities for students to develop these skills are often both embedded in

everyday learning and explicitly taught.

When it comes to assessment, pre-K takes a broader look at children’s knowledge and skill development. Assessments typically consider a variety of evidence obtained through direct assessments, observation, and performance tasks. While it may not be feasible to implement assessments in these same ways for older students, K–12 schools should further explore ways to capture a more well-rounded picture of student learning and development and use that information to inform instruction and classroom climate throughout the year.

In terms of accountability and monitoring, evaluators of pre-K programs and observers of pre-K teachers consider elements of classroom climate and teacher-child interactions that promote student skills for success. Tools that zero in on the quality of interactions between teachers and children, such as CLASS, are often required as part of state-funded pre-K monitoring, federal monitoring of Head Start programs, or for program accreditation.

Finally, early education embraces child development research to guide the creation of standards, curricula, instructional methods, and assessments. In K–12, research on early and middle childhood as well as on adolescence should do the same. Some pre-packaged programs already attempt to reflect students’ developmental or grade level, such as the aforementioned TRIPOD student surveys. But there are opportunities to do more.

# CONCLUSIONS

**H**igh-quality pre-K programs are proof that the conversation need not be about whether schools should focus on imparting content knowledge OR skills for success. Both are important, and are in many ways symbiotic. Certain skills (e.g., perseverance) help students attain knowledge, while certain knowledge (e.g., knowing that “intelligence” is not fixed, but malleable) helps students improve their skills (e.g., perseverance).

While research demonstrates that many skills for success should be incorporated as early in childhood as possible, it also clearly shows that schools can continue to impact SFS in older students. Schools that are struggling, though, often overlook SFS in favor of intense focus on content knowledge, seeing it as an “extra” they cannot afford to do, literally and figuratively. What they fail to understand is that these skills are, in fact, closely linked to academic achievement and other positive student outcomes. Some of the impact can be indirect, such as through changing how students perceive their own skills and abilities in order to promote increased engagement in school and further skills development. Having these types of SFS can help students to succeed academically and personally.

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Having a federal focus on cultivating SFS would help promote a clearer focus in this area for K–12 schools, as it has in pre-K. However, just putting policy in place is not sufficient to attain the goal of strengthening these skills in our students. Which entity “owns” implementation of the policy matters for gaining attention and obtaining support from key stakeholders. Whether these efforts are successful will depend on the willingness and ability of

educators, and the communities in which they teach, to move this work forward. One critical part of developing educator and community excitement about SFS is to communicate the evidence for how these can help students succeed in school and in life more broadly and how they are a critical piece of the move toward college- and career-ready standards, not an add on. Above all, educators must be provided with the training necessary to do the work.

That being said, any approach taken to improving SFS must recognize that some significant changes to school and classroom environments may need to occur to have a long-term impact. Research indicates that the learning context is important for students’ development of some SFS, and failing to address a negative or unsupportive educational climate could prevent potential benefits of other SFS efforts from being realized.<sup>125</sup> Transforming learning environments will require sustained focus and resources at the district and state levels, with support from the federal government.

Assessing each of these specific types of skills in individual students is difficult, and may not be possible without significant time and expense. In fact, it may not be possible to assess certain skills well at all. For example, trying to measure “grit” on an annual basis may not make sense if grit is defined as self-control in pursuit of a *long-term* goal. But as more research is done, both by academics and practitioners, the methods for doing so are improving. These assessments, along with content knowledge tests—such as the new Common Core State Standards aligned assessments—can provide a more comprehensive understanding of students’ skills and areas for growth. But just because we can measure individual students’ skills does not mean that we necessarily should, at least not in a consequential way. K–12 policymakers and practitioners can learn from early education programs that use student-level assessments for diagnostic and formative purposes, teacher observations to inform and improve SFS practices, and ratings of school and classroom environments to create supportive conditions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**N**ew America makes several recommendations for how various entities—federal and state governments, LEAs, schools, and research institutions—can encourage progress on developing certain SFS in schools, PreK–12.

## Four Key Recommendations for Federal and State Policymakers

*Federal and state policymakers should set the stage for a greater school focus on bolstering certain skills for success by:*

- 1. Providing funding and resources for LEAs and schools to experiment with different implementation models and assessments.**  
Approaches to cultivating students' skills for success are not necessarily costly, but associated needs for planning, professional development, and assessment can require additional resources. Support from government agencies can help encourage schools, LEAs, and states to make this a priority. A first step could be to provide competitive funds to a subset of LEAs and/or states that have already adopted and begun to implement broad SFS approaches. They would, in turn, agree to share resources developed and implementation and outcome conclusions. A portion of funds should bolster efforts by states and LEAs that want to incorporate a larger focus on SFS and have a thoughtful plan for doing so. States, LEAs, and schools should also be required to explain how this work fits into their larger strategic plans. It is also important to require clear partnerships between agencies or departments that should be involved in the work to ensure coordination towards meeting established goals. Finally, requiring a sustainability plan will help prevent the work from falling by the wayside if outside funding sources disappear.
- 2. Promoting a more holistic approach to school assessment and accountability.** There must be some stakes to ensure school and LEA leaders are held responsible for developing students' skills for success in all grade levels. In particular, they should be held responsible for establishing a positive school climate and culture, as the learning environment is a precondition for developing engaged and successful students. This could be done by including school climate as part of public reporting and transparency. For example, states could include school climate survey results as a component of each schools' report card, if the survey has been proven to be valid and reliable. Schools identified as "in need of improvement" could be required to review their climate and practices as part of a needs assessment and to develop a plan to address subsequent issues. However, policymakers must ensure sufficient time for high-quality educator training and assessments for formative purposes before releasing assessment data for public consumption or "high stakes" accountability purposes.
- 3. Encouraging shifts in educator practice by incorporating a focus on developing students' skills for success into educator evaluations that inform development and personnel decisions.** Observations of teachers should provide formative and summative feedback on their skills in creating environments and/or providing explicit instruction to support SFS. Additionally, surveys that collect student perceptions of classroom climate hold promise as one measure of SFS implementation to use in teacher performance evaluations. In fact, seven states are already doing so, and nine states explicitly allow but do not require surveys to be included.<sup>126</sup> Similarly for school leaders, surveys that collect teacher, student, and parent perceptions of school climate could be one element of evaluations.

4. **Promoting a more holistic approach to student assessment.** A more comprehensive system of student-level assessments—including elements such as teacher observations, performance tasks, and computer-based activities—can provide helpful formative information for teachers, parents, and students. However, while pre-K and kindergarten teachers may sometimes use this kind of information to guide discussions with parents about whether children are socially ready to move to the next grade, generally the results from these assessments should not be used to hold students back or for a class grade. Holistic student assessment would be much more likely to occur if school accountability systems were also based on more comprehensive measures than standardized tests in math and English Language Arts.

### Additional Recommendations

To ensure the above policy recommendations have the desired effect, the following stakeholders should engage in these additional actions:

#### *Federal Policymakers*

- **Funding more research to help determine the most effective approaches and assessment methods** and disseminate that information widely, including to states, LEAs, and schools.

#### *State Policymakers*

- **Recognizing that passing legislation and establishing regulations to create skills for success standards can help ensure schools prioritize these skills, but are not sufficient on their own.** Because of this, policymakers must also ensure that:
  - Standard-setting and coordination at the state level are paired with implementation support at the local level.
  - When developing a comprehensive set of SFS standards, LEAs should be allowed flexibility to stagger the implementation of those standards based on a local needs assessment that identifies SFS priority areas.

- At the state level, SFS standards be part of a department closely tied to academic instruction and school performance. Not doing so almost guarantees standards will not be incorporated into school and classroom practices.
- At the local level, school leaders and teachers understand why the standards have been created or why they are being asked to focus on school climate. In order to garner backing at the local level, states will need to provide ample communication, effective training, reasonable expectations, and sufficient room for customization for the approaches used to impart skills. Key assessment measures should be comparable across schools.
- **Requiring educator preparation programs, as a part of program approval, to train prospective educators in methods for establishing positive classroom and school environments** which can bolster students' SFS.
  - Educator preparation programs must focus on helping teacher and school leader candidates learn about research and teaching strategies to impart these skills as well. To do so, states can require a demonstrated focus on these areas for program accreditation, and attempt to assess familiarity with the research and approaches on licensure and certification exams.
- **Providing LEAs and schools with digestible research on the importance of promoting student SFS on student outcomes**—including academic outcomes—to build support for a larger school focus on these skills.
  - States should also provide this information in a format that can be easily shared with educators, parents, students, and the community and offer suggestions for how to effectively do so (e.g., through social media, at parent-teacher conferences, etc.).

#### *LEA-Level Policymakers*

- **Clearly communicating with school leaders and teachers** to help ensure all educators are on board with intentionally supporting the development of students' SFS.

- Noalee McDonald-Augustine, former co-chair of Kansas’ SECD Standards Committee, shared her metaphor for helping educators understand why these skills must be developed at every grade level: “Athletes work on the basics at every practice, at every level. Even though you might be a professional, you continue to work on the basic skills, even though they’re more automatic. It’s the same thing with [skills for success]—we can’t just assume because [students] learned it in elementary school that you don’t need to continue to address it in later grades .”<sup>127</sup>
  - Another communication strategy is to explain how implementing conditions and practices that promote SFS has always been part of an educator’s job; it is simply being more formalized.
- **Providing ample training for school leaders and teachers on how to develop students’ SFS**, and use feedback from assessments to drive professional learning opportunities.
  - In many cases, these are new expectations that educators did not necessarily train for in their preparation program. Educator understanding and comfort with implementing approaches for delivering SFS and establishing positive learning environments are necessary for realizing their full potential.
- **Sharing research with educators, parents, students, and the community on the impact of promoting SFS on student outcomes**, including academic outcomes.

### *School-Level Educators*

- **Raising awareness of the importance of SFS** among school and LEA leadership and peers.
  - Educators do not have to wait for policymakers to take action in this area. A school leadership team or group of educators can drive adoption of practices and environments that cultivate these skills in students, as has occasionally been the model by which the Responsive Classroom program has expanded from being used by a few teachers in a school to a school-wide initiative.

- **Beginning to embed practices throughout the day that help build student SFS**, potentially along with explicit skills instruction.
  - While stand-alone lessons and programs can help build students’ SFS, there is potential for more impact by embedding the focus throughout the day across other areas of learning, discipline, classroom organization, and procedures.

**Looking to students for insights, when developmentally appropriate**, into how to improve classroom and school environments.

- This should include conversations and dialogue with students (e.g., as with Boston’s Student Advisory Council<sup>128</sup>) in addition to broader surveys and other data collection methods.

### *Education and Psychometric Researchers*

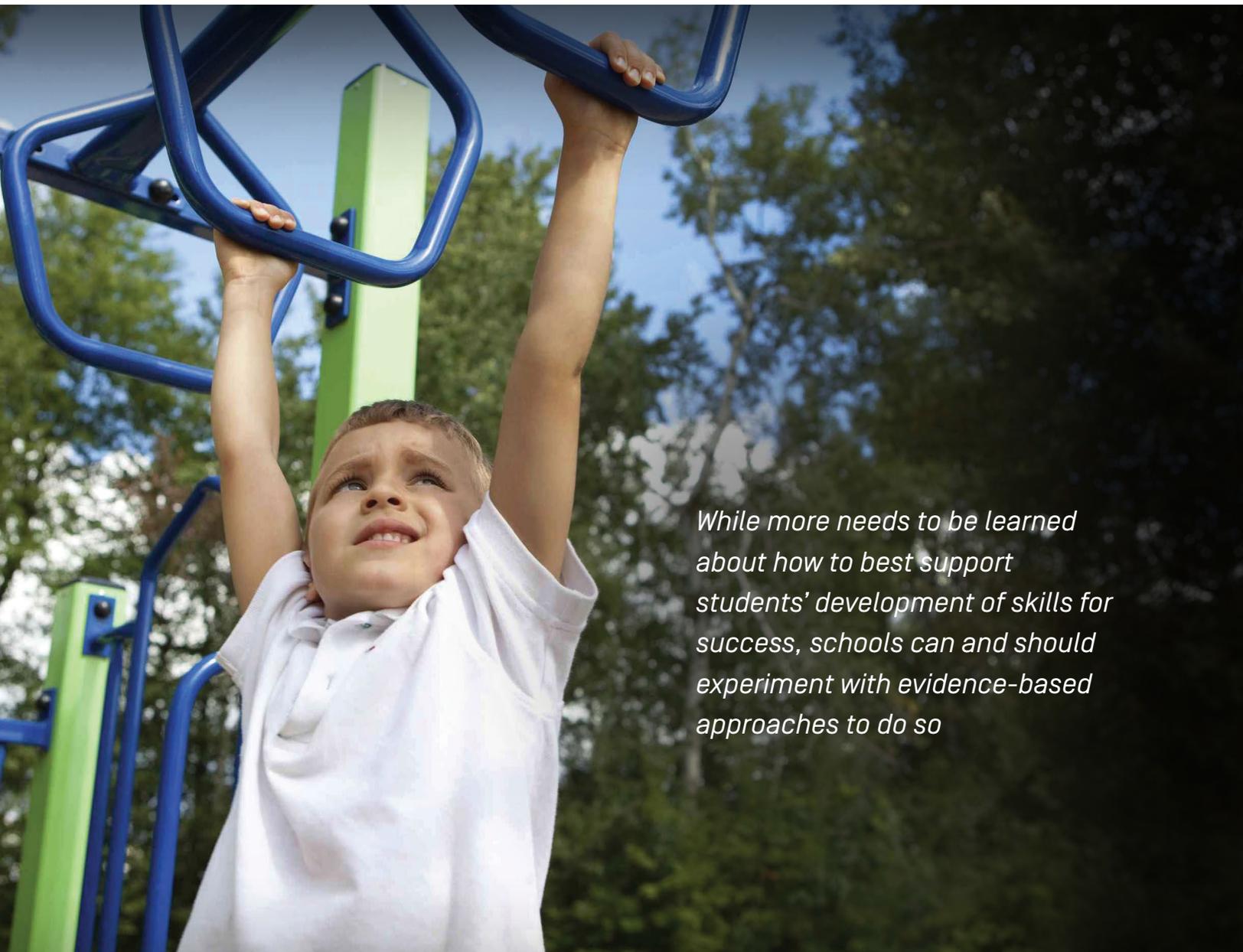
- **Continuing to research new and current implementation methods and programs** in order to provide feedback to practitioners and policymakers about which may help them best impart SFS.
  - It is particularly important to capture the level and fidelity of implementation of these practices and methods in schools, in order to understand their full potential versus actual impact. Providing an understanding of the work necessary to train school staff to implement these approaches with fidelity will also help ensure adequate resources are available and enlisted in this work.
- **Continuing to research current assessment methods** to assess validity and reliability, and **developing additional assessments** that can meet these criteria
  - For example, there seems to be new potential in computer game-based assessment. Further research should be done to see if this is a viable approach to SFS assessment, or whether the skills they are able to measure are unlikely to be applicable to real-world contexts. In developing new evaluations, researchers should, when possible, take into account the time and resource constraints of schools and teachers.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

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**T**he responsibility for developing SFS does not lie with students and parents alone, and pre-K programs are proof that this need not be a bifurcated conversation about whether schools should focus on imparting content knowledge *or* skills for success. While more needs to be learned about how to best support students' development of some of these skills from pre-K through secondary school, schools can and should experiment with evidence-based approaches

to directly and indirectly do so. But only through a focus on assessment will schools know which skills to work on, which approach(es) to use, and how well they are implementing the approach(es). And only by ensuring that school and educator accountability systems ultimately incorporate information from these assessments will developing student SFS be seen as a priority for elementary, middle, and high schools, as it is for high-quality pre-K programs.



*While more needs to be learned about how to best support students' development of skills for success, schools can and should experiment with evidence-based approaches to do so*

## Appendix | What are Different Skills for Success Terms and Definitions?

| Terminology                                | Leading Group(s)  | Definition   |
|--|---|--|
| 21st Century Skills                        | Partnership for 21st Century Skills; National Research Council                      | Partnership defines as: 1) Mastery of core academic subjects and themes; 2) Learning and innovation skills (critical thinking, communications, collaboration, creativity); 3) Information, media, and technology skills; 4) Life and career skills (flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cultural competence, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility) |
| Academic Enablers                          | Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER)                                      | WCER defines as: social skills, study skills, motivation, and engagement   |
| Academic Mindsets                          | University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR); Mindset Works   | CCSR defines as: The psycho-social attitudes or beliefs one has about oneself in relation to academic work. These mindsets affect our motivation and perseverance, and include: 1) I belong in this academic community; 2) My ability and competence grow with my effort; 3) I can succeed at this; 4) This work has value for me  |
| Approaches to Learning                     | Office of Head Start, Administration of Children and Families; state pre-K programs | Head Start defines as: 1) Initiative and curiosity; 2) persistence and attentiveness; and 3) cooperation   |
| Character                                  | Character Education Partnership (CEP)   | CEP defines as: Moral character [empathy, fairness, trustworthiness, generosity, and compassion]; Performance character [effort, initiative, diligence, self-discipline, and perseverance]   |
| Deeper Learning                            | William and Flora Hewlett Foundation  | Hewlett defines as: 1) Master core academic content; 2) Think critically and solve complex problems; 3) Work collaboratively; 4) Communicate effectively; 5) Learn how to learn [set/monitor progress toward goals, know/apply study skills, seek out challenges, ask for help when necessary, reflect on learning, delay gratification, etc.]; 6) Develop academic mindsets                                     |
| Executive Function                         | Developmental Psychologists; National Center on Learning Disabilities (NCLD)        | NCLD defines as: A set of mental processes that helps connect past experience with present action. People use it to perform activities such as planning, organizing, strategizing, paying attention to and remembering details, and managing time and space.   |
| School Climate Domains                     | National School Climate Center (NSCC)   | NSCC defines as: 1) Safety (rules and norms, sense of physical and social-emotional security); 2) Teaching and Learning (support for learning, social and civic learning); 3) Interpersonal relationships (respect for diversity, social support [student-adult and student-student]); 4) Institutional environment (school engagement, physical surroundings, staff leadership and professional relationships)  |
| Social and Emotional Learning Competencies | Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)                  | CASEL defines as: 1) self-awareness; 2) self-management; 3) social awareness; 4) relationship skills; and 5) responsible decision-making   |

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